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## INTERNATIONAL APPLICATION PUBLISHED UNDER THE PATENT COOPERATION TREATY (PCT)

(51) International Patent Classification 6 :  C12N 5/00, 15/00, 15/09, 15/63		A1	(11) International Publication Number: WO 98/30677  (43) International Publication Date: 16 July 1998 (16.07.98)
(21) International Application Number: PCT/US98/00340  (22) International Filing Date: 9 January 1998 (09.01.98)		(74) Agents: HOLMES, Emily et al.; The Scripps Research Institute, 10550 North Torrey Pines Road, TPC-8, La Jolla, CA 92037 (US).	
(30) Priority Data: 60/034,737 10 January 1997 (10.01.97) US 60/046,518 15 May 1997 (15.05.97) US		(81) Designated States: AL, AM, AT, AU, AZ, BA, BB, BG, BR, BY, CA, CH, CN, CU, CZ, DE, DK, EE, ES, FI, GB, GE, GH, GM, GW, HU, ID, IL, IS, JP, KE, KG, KP, KR, KZ, LC, LK, LR, LS, LT, LU, LV, MD, MG, MK, MN, MW, MX, NO, NZ, PL, PT, RO, RU, SD, SE, SG, SI, SK, SL, TJ, TM, TR, TT, UA, UG, US, UZ, VN, YU, ZW, ARIPO patent (GH, GM, KE, LS, MW, SD, SZ, UG, ZW), Eurasian patent (AM, AZ, BY, KG, KZ, MD, RU, TJ, TM), European patent (AT, BE, CH, DE, DK, ES, FI, FR, GB, GR, IE, IT, LU, MC, NL, PT, SE), OAPI patent (BF, BJ, CF, CG, CI, CM, GA, GN, ML, MR, NE, SN, TD, TG).	
(63) Related by Continuation (CON) or Continuation-in-Part (CIP) to Earlier Applications US 60/034,737 (CIP) Filed on 10 January 1997 (10.01.97) US 60/046,518 (CIP) Filed on 15 May 1997 (15.05.97)		Published With international search report. Before the expiration of the time limit for amending the claims and to be republished in the event of the receipt of amendments.	
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(54) Title: CATARACTOGENESIS AND DISRUPTION OF D3 CONNEXIN GENE IN MAMMALS AND METHODS OF USE			
(57) Abstract <p>The invention relates to cataractogenesis relating to disruption of an endogenous <math>\alpha</math>3 connexin gene and the degradation of lens crystallin proteins, particularly <math>\gamma</math>-crystallin proteins. More specifically, the invention describes the production of a non-human mammal in which the expression of <math>\alpha</math>3 connexin protein is disrupted via the insertion of an exogenous disrupted <math>\alpha</math>3 connexin gene into the genomic DNA of a non-human mammal thereby producing a non-human lacking functional <math>\alpha</math>3 connexin protein or <math>\alpha</math>3 connexin protein, the absence of which leads to age-related cataract formation. The invention further relates to compositions and methods of making and use for diagnostic and therapeutic applications relating to cataracts.</p>			

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## CATARACTOGENESIS AND DISRUPTION OF D3 CONNEXIN GENE IN MAMMALS AND METHODS OF USE

**5 Technical Field**

The invention relates to cataractogenesis and the disruption of  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. More specifically, the invention concerns the insertion of an exogenous disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene into the genomic DNA of a non-human mammals resulting in the lack of  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein, the absence of which leads to age-related cataract formation. The invention further relates to vector constructs containing the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. Methods of making and using the  $\alpha 3$  disrupted connexin gene for preparing mammals containing mutant  $\alpha 3$  alleles that result in the absence of functional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein are described. Screening methods are also described using such mammals to study cataract biology. The invention also relates to in vitro and in vivo screening methods to identify compounds useful in preventing or treating cataracts.

This invention further relates generally to the prevention of cataract formation or the treatment of existing cataracts with interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) inhibitors.

**Background of the Invention**

The vertebrate lens consists of a single anterior surface layer of cuboidal epithelial cells covering the bulk of the lens, formed by lens fiber cells. The maintenance of the metabolic activities of these interior cells has been suggested to depend on a unique network for current flow, in the form of ions, that connects interior mature fibers, peripheral newly-differentiating fibers and anterior epithelia cells (Mathias et al., Physiol. Rev., 77:21-49 (1997); Robinson and Patterson,

Curr. Eye Res., 2:843-847 (1983)). Gap junction channels formed between fiber-fiber, fiber-epithelial and epithelial-epithelial cells have been proposed to be a major part of this network, and to play a important role in lens homeostasis (Goodenough, Sem. in Cell Biol., 3:49-58 (1992); Rae et al., J. Mem. Biol., 150:89-103 (1996)).

Gap junction channels consist of two hemichannels, called connexons, that are located in the plasma membranes of two adjacent cells. Each connexon is composed of 6 subunits of the protein termed connexin. These channels, commonly found in arrays called plaques, allow small molecules, of molecular weight less than 1000 daltons, to pass directly between the cytoplasms of the two connected cells. Thus far, more than a dozen connexin genes have been identified in vertebrates (Bruzzone et al., Eur. J. Biochem., 238:1-27 (1996); Kumar and Gilula, Cell, 84:381-388 (1996)). Three connexin genes have been reported to be expressed in the lens. The  $\alpha_1$  connexin (Cx43) has been detected in mouse lens epithelial cells (Yancey et al., Devel., 114:203-212 (1992)). Both  $\alpha_3$  (Cx46) and  $\alpha_8$  (Cx50) connexin have been detected in the elongating primary fibers, as well as in the secondary fibers during lens development, and they are colocalized to the same gap junction plaques (Paul et al., J. Cell Biol., 115:1077-1089 (1991)).

The most abundant proteins in the vertebrate lens are crystallins, which account for more than 90% of the lens soluble proteins (Bloemendaal, New York, John Wiley and Sons, pp 85-136 (1981); Harding and Crabbe, In: The Eye, Davson, H. (ed) Academic Press, pp 207-492 (1984). Crystallins from mammalian lenses are divided into three major classes:  $\alpha$ -,  $\beta$ - and  $\gamma$ -crystallins. Lens transparency results from the suprastuctural organization of the lens that is created by both plasma membrane components and cytoplasmic proteins, including the crystallins.

However, the molecular mechanisms by which this organization is generated and maintained are not well understood.

Although connexin proteins have been suggested to play a critical role in vertebrate lens development and in maintaining lens transparency, the exact nature of their structural and functional roles have not been identified.

Brief Description of the Invention

The present invention now provides an *in vivo* animal model system and compositions to produce such for studying the role of α3 connexin protein in lens development and for identifying drugs useful in the treatment of cataracts that develop postnatally in α3-connexin-deficient mammals.

In one aspect, the invention provides a non-human mammal, preferably a mouse, and its progeny either containing a nonfunctional α3 connexin protein or lacking functional α3 connexin protein altogether. The resultant non-human mammal is referred to as a α3 connexin-deficient non-human mammal. The α3 connexin deficiency is generated by the insertion of a nucleic acid sequence comprising at least a portion of the α3 connexin gene into the genome of the mammal. The inserted α3 connexin nucleic acid sequence present in the genome is referred to as a disrupted α3 connexin gene. In preferred embodiments, a disrupted α3 connexin gene lacks at least one transmembrane-encoding region and more preferably two regions and most preferably four regions. In a further embodiment, an α3 connexin gene lacks one or more nucleotides in the protein coding region, the presence of which results in a nonfunctional α3 connexin protein. In another embodiment, an α3 connexin gene contains one or more nucleotide substitutions, the presence of which also results in a nonfunctional α3 connexin protein.

In another aspect, the invention provides a nucleic acid

sequence corresponding to the above-described disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene operably linked to a plasmid vector. A preferred plasmid comprises a nucleic acid sequence that is an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacking four transmembrane domains. An  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid further comprises at least a selectable marker, preferably the gene encoding neomycin resistance. In other embodiments, an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid also comprises a marker gene for use in detecting the presence of an  $\alpha 3$  mutant allele in a mammal of this invention. A preferred marker gene encodes lacZ. A preferred disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid is the plasmid, designated p $\alpha 3$ -GZK, on deposit with American Type Culture Collection having ATCC Accession Number 97848, the deposit of which is further described below. In further aspects, the invention provides an embryonic stem cell, preferably a JS-1 or an ES cell, containing a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene.

In another aspect, the invention provides methods for making a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene and plasmids containing such genes.

In a further aspect, the invention provides a method for studying  $\alpha 3$ -dependent nuclear fiber cataract formation in the lens of the mammalian model system as a basis for human cataract formation.

In yet another aspect, the invention provides a method of using the  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient mammal that develop postnatal nuclear lens opacities of this invention for identifying compounds for therapeutic treatment thereof comprising administering the compounds to a mammal and determining the effects of the compounds. The lens is either left in place in the mammal or is explanted into culture, i.e., an in vitro culture. For preventing cataracts, the test compound is applied before the cataracts form in the model. The mammal or cultured

lens is then observed over a preselected period of time to assess the effectiveness of the test compound on preventing the formation of cataracts. Similarly, compounds are tested in the same system for the effect on delaying the progression of 5 cataract formation, for stopping the progression and also for reversing cataract formation.

The methods of the present invention are further based on the related discovery of an interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional analog thereof in the effected animal that 10 resulted as a consequence of the gene disruption. Thus, in a therapeutic aspect, the invention provides a method for preventing cataract formation or treating a formed cataract in a subject by the administration of a therapeutically effective cataract inhibiting amount of an interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting 15 enzyme (ICE) inhibitor to a subject. Treating a formed cataract includes delaying, stopping or reversing the progression of cataract formation. Preferred ICE inhibitors are delivered topically, orally or intravenously. Acceptable carriers for mediating such delivery are also contemplated.

20 Methods are contemplated for screening candidate compounds to identify new inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog. One preferred approach is based on the known cleavage pattern of a crystallin lens protein, preferably  $\gamma$ , by ICE or functional ICE analog. An inhibitor of 25 ICE or an analog is then identified by detecting an alteration in the cleavage pattern of the lens protein. In other words, an inhibitor is identified by detecting an uncleaved substrate that is normally cleaved in the absence of an inhibitor.

Another preferred screening assay for an inhibitor is to 30 use any substrate of ICE including a crystallin lens protein, preferably  $\gamma$ , in conjunction with a homogenate of lens isolated from a non-human mammal having disrupted alleles of  $\alpha 3$  connexin

gene, where the homogenate contains ICE or functional ICE analog. As before, an inhibitor is identified by detecting an uncleaved substrate that is normally cleaved in the absence of an inhibitor.

5 For either screening method, the substrate may either be in a mixture with other proteins or may be in purified form. A preferred ICE substrate is  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens proteins. The assay is preferably conducted where the lens protein, ICE or functional ICE analog, and the candidate inhibitor are in  
10 solution.

The present invention also contemplates kits and diagnostic systems with the system and compositions as described above to identify inhibitors of ICE or functional analog thereof as well as to identify compounds useful in preventing, treating or  
15 reversing the formation of cataracts.

Other variations and uses of the present invention will be apparent to one skilled in the art in light of the present disclosures.

20 Brief Description of Drawings

In the figures forming a portion of this disclosure:

Figure 1A shows the physical maps of the wild type  $\alpha 3$  connexin allele,  $\alpha 3$  targeting vector, and mutant  $\alpha 3$  allele. Restriction enzyme sites are marked as follows: A, Apa I; B, Bam HI; H, Hgi AI; H3, Hind III; and RI, EcoRI. (RI), (A) and (H3) designate the mutated sites after construction. The non-italicized amino acid sequence is the N-terminal 17 amino acid residues of  $\alpha 3$  connexin. The amino acid sequence in italics represents the residues encoded by a linker sequence in front of  
25 the lac Z gene.  
30

Figure 1B is a Southern blot analysis of an  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) ES cell clone and an  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) ES cell clone. DNA from ES cells was

digested with Bam HI and hybridized with the probe A (shown in Figure 1A). The 12 kb band corresponds to the wild-type  $\alpha 3$  allele, and the 5.5 kb band to the mutant  $\alpha 3$  allele.

Figure 1C is a Southern blot analysis of F2 mice. An  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) 5, an  $\alpha 3$  (+/-), and an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mouse were analyzed using probe A as used for the ES cell analysis in B.

Figure 1D shows the genotypes of the  $\alpha 3$  'knockout' mice that were determined also by PCR, using three primers termed P1, P2 and P3. A 350 bp PCR fragment was generated from the wild-type  $\alpha 3$  allele, the size predicted to result from the P1 and P2 primers, and a 500 bp fragment from the mutant  $\alpha 3$  allele was generated as predicted from using P1 and P3 primers.

Figure 1E shows total RNAs that were isolated from  $\alpha 3$  (+/+),  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses from one month old mice, and 15 analyzed by Northern blot using a cDNA probe covering the encoding DNA sequence for the four transmembrane domains of  $\alpha 3$  connexin. Fifteen  $\mu$ g RNA was loaded in each lane. The equal intensity of the rRNAs confirms that each lane has an equivalent amount of RNA.

20 Figure 2 shows the expression pattern of the lacZ-nls gene and lens development.

In Figure 2A, three embryos at stage 14 dpc were stained for lacZ as whole mounts. LacZ staining was evident in the lenses from both  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) (right) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) (middle) 25 embryos. The lens of the  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) embryo was not detectably stained (left). The  $\alpha 3$  genotype of these embryos was determined by Southern analysis of genomic DNA isolated from the yolk sac.

In Figure 2B, a section along the equatorial plane of an eye from an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) embryo at stage 14 dpc, after whole mount 30 lacZ staining, contains blue stained lens, surrounded by a circle of retinal pigmented epithelium.

Figure 3C shows a frozen section, along the anterior-

posterior axis from the eye of a 2 week old  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mouse, was stained for lacZ-nls activity. The nuclei of the newly formed fiber cells contained a strong blue staining, which gradually disappeared towards the interior fibers. A weak blue staining 5 was also observed in the nuclei of the lens epithelial cells located at the anterior surface of the lens (indicated by arrows).

Figure 2D is a histological section of the eye from an  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) embryo at stage 18.5 dpc.

10 Figure 2E is a histological section of the eye from an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) embryo at stage 18.5 dpc.

Figure 3 illustrates the nuclear cataract phenotype of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice.

Figure 3A contains the lenses (unfixed) dissected from 15 fresh eyes of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of two months, and photographed from their anterior surface with a dissection microscope.

Figure 3B contains a side view (anterior side of the lens on the right and posterior side on the left) of similar lenses 20 embedded in LR white resin after fixation with 2.5% glutaraldehyde. The black staining on the lens surface is the retinal pigmented epithelial cells attached to the lenses. Nuc represents a 2X enlargement of the nuclear region of the cataract lens. A large aggregate associated with the cataract 25 is indicated by an arrow in upper right panel. The scale bar is 1 mm.

Figure 4 illustrates the histological and immunocytochemical analysis of adult mice.

Figure 4A are histological sections from the anterior bow 30 region (left) and the nuclear region (right) of the same cataract lens embedded in LR white resin shown in Figure 3B. The arrow denotes an aggregate of undefined composition in the

nuclear region. The sections were stained with methylene blue. The scale bar is 10  $\mu\text{m}$ .

Figure 4B shows indirect immunofluorescence images with double labeling of  $\alpha 3$  (FITC, green) and  $\alpha 8$  (RITC, red) connexins 5 in the lens cortex of a frozen section from a one month old  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mouse viewed with laser scanning confocal microscopy. The middle panel is the merged image from the right and left panels; the yellow denotes the co-localization of  $\alpha 3$  and  $\alpha 8$  connexins.

In Figure 4C, the left and right panels contain the double 10 labeling pattern of  $\alpha 3$  and  $\alpha 8$  connexins in the lens cortex of a frozen section from an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mouse at the age of 1 month. No  $\alpha 3$  connexin was detectable by  $\alpha 3$  antibodies (left panel). However, the large gap junction plaques formed by  $\alpha 8$  connexin 15 were still detected by the  $\alpha 8$  monoclonal antibodies. Scale bar for images in (B) and (C) is 10  $\mu\text{m}$ .

Figure 5 are freeze-fracture replicas of the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of 3 weeks.

Figures 5A and 5B contain gap junction plaques (arrows) 20 that were observed in the superficial cortex of the wild-type lens (+/+) and the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lens.

Figure 5C shows arrays of furrowed membrane fingers in the nuclear region from an  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lens, whereas Figure 5D shows an altered membrane with irregular furrowed structures from the same nuclear region of an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lens.

25 Figure 5E shows the square-array membrane particles (5-6 nm size, arrowhead) that were observed as small islands in the furrows of the membrane arrays from the  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lens nucleus, with many interdigitated 9- to 11-nm particles (arrows).

Figure 5F shows that much more extensive areas of the 30 square-array particles (arrowheads) were observed in the disorganized furrowed membranes from the nucleus of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses. The scale bar is 200 nm in all images.

Figure 6 shows lens weight and crystallin profiles.

Figure 6A is a comparison of the total lens weight of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice as a function of age. Lenses were weighed immediately after dissection from the eyes. The lens weight in the figure represents an average of lenses from 6 to 16 mice. The filled circles and open triangles represent the total lens weight of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lenses, respectively.

Figure 6B shows the elution profiles of the total water soluble crystallins from the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) [ $\Delta$ ] and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) [ $\circ$ ] mice at the age of 2 months.  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$ , and  $\gamma$  peaks correspond to the three major classes of crystallins.

Figure 6C shows the elution profiles of the total water soluble crystallins from the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of 4 months.

Figure 6D shows the elution profiles of the total water soluble crystallins from the cortical regions of the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of 4 months.

Figure 6E shows the elution profiles of the total water soluble crystallins from the nuclear regions of the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of 4 months. The peak labelled H represents the water-soluble high-molecular weight protein aggregates.

Figure 7 illustrates the electrophoretic characterization of lens NaOH insoluble proteins and crystallins.

In Figure 7A, a Coomassie blue stained gel is shown of the NaOH-insoluble proteins from the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) (lane 1 and 2),  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) (lane 3 and 4) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) (lane 5 and 6) littermates at the age of 2 months. Both lenses from a single mouse were used to prepare the NaOH-insoluble proteins; these proteins were divided into two equal portions, which were dissolved in an equal volume of sample buffer, with and without 10 mM DTT. Equal volumes of the samples were

separated in a 12.5% polyacrylamide gel and stained with Coomassie Blue. The samples with 10 mM DTT were in lanes 1, 3 and 5, and those without DTT in lanes 2, 4 and 6. Significant amounts of protein from 17 to 27 kDa in size were observed  
5 only in lane 5 which contained the NaOH-insoluble protein from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses in DTT containing sample buffer. Although lane 6 had an equal amount of protein as lane 5, due to the absence of DTT, most of the insoluble protein existed as high molecular weight aggregates which could not enter the 5%  
10 stacking gel. The major band, observed in lanes 1-4, corresponds to the major lens membrane protein, MP26. Two arrows on the right side denote the bands (in lane 5) corresponding to the 9 and 11 kDa cleaved  $\gamma$ -crystallins which were purified for determination of their N-terminal peptide  
15 sequence.

Figure 7B shows the comparison of crystallin protein profiles in the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice by Western blot analysis. Protein extracts from  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lenses (lanes 1-4) or  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses (lanes 5-8) were subjected to  
20 SDS-PAGE and Western blotting. All samples were analysed in sample buffer containing 10 mM DTT. Lanes 1 and 5 contained the total lens cortical protein; lanes 2 and 6 contained the water-soluble fraction from the lens nucleus; lane 3 and 7 contained the NaOH-soluble fraction from the lens nucleus; and  
25 lanes 4 and 8 contained the NaOH-insoluble fraction from the lens nucleus. Four different polyclonal crystallin antibodies, anti- $\alpha A$ , anti- $\alpha B$ , anti- $\beta B2$  and anti- $\gamma$ , were used to analyze these samples. The position of the intact form of each crystallin protein is indicated on the left side. The  
30 arrows on the right side indicate the positions and size (in kD) of cleaved forms of  $\alpha A$ ,  $\alpha B$ ,  $\beta B2$  and  $\gamma$ -crystallins in the NaOH-insoluble proteins from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses.

Figures 8A-8C show the coding nucleotide sequence of mouse  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene and the encoded protein. The nucleotide and amino acid sequences are listed in SEQ ID NO 1.

5

Detailed Description of the Invention

A. Definitions

Knockout: A partial or complete suppression of the expression of at least a portion of a protein encoded by an 10 endogenous DNA sequence in a cell.

Knockout Construct: A nucleic acid sequence that is designed to decrease or suppress expression of a protein encoded by endogenous DNA sequences in a cell. The nucleic acid sequence used as the knockout construct is typically 15 comprised of (1) DNA from some portion of the gene (exon sequence, intron sequence, and/or promoter sequence) to be suppressed and (2) a marker sequence used to detect the presence of the knockout construct in the cell.

Disruption of the Gene or Gene Disruption: Insertion of 20 a nucleic acid sequence into one region of the native DNA sequence (usually one or more exons) and/or the promoter region of a gene so as to decrease or prevent expression of that gene in the cell as compared to the wild-type or naturally occurring sequence of the gene.

25 Rodent and Rodents: Includes any and all members of the phylogenetic order Rodentia including any and all progeny of all future generations derived therefrom.

Murine: Includes any and all members of the family Muridae, including rats and mice.

30 Progeny or Offspring: Includes any and all future generations derived and descending from a particular mammal, i.e., a mammal containing a knockout construct inserted into

its genomic DNA. Thus, progeny of any successive generation are included herein such that the progeny, the F1, F2, F3 generations and so on indefinitely are included in this definition.

5       Analog: Refers to a molecule substantially similar in function to interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE).

Homolog: Refers to a molecules that is structurally or functionally equivalent to a molecule of the present invention.

10      Therapeutically Effective Amount: Refers to an amount effective in treating or ameliorating a cataract condition in a subject characterized by growth including formation, progression and regression.

15      Prophylactically Effective Amount: Refers to an amount effective in preventing the formation of a cataract.

Isolated: Refers to a state or condition that is not the natural state, i.e., that, if it occurs in nature, it has been changed or removed from its original environment or both.

20   B.   Transgenic Non-Human Mammals Presenting with Cataracts Following Disruption of  $\alpha$ 3 Connexin Gene

1.    Preparation of  $\alpha$ 3 Connexin Gene-Disrupted Non-Human Mammals

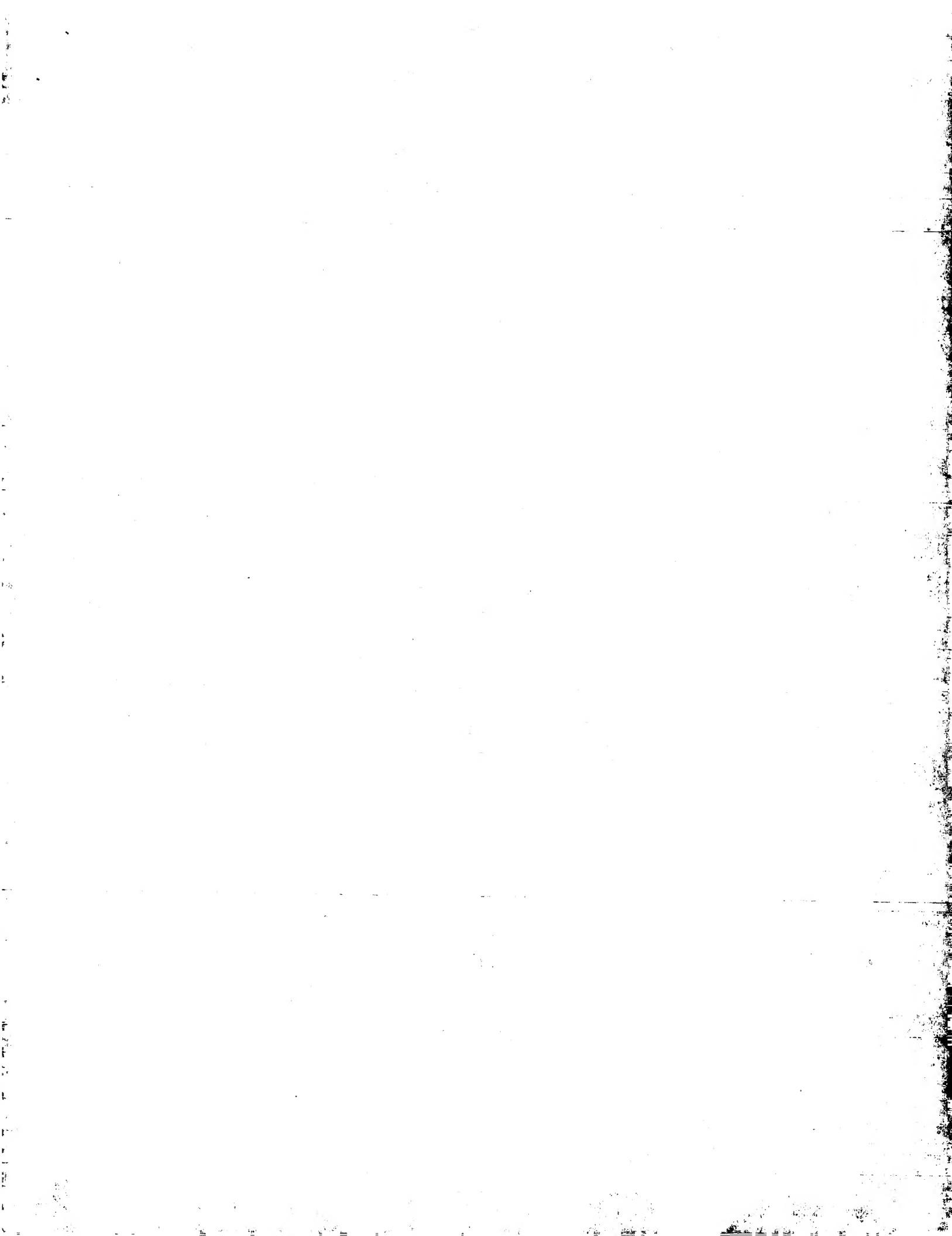
Methods of making disrupted genes and mammals containing such genes are well known to one of ordinary skill in the art. The present invention is based in part on the ability to decrease or completely suppress the level of expression of a particular gene in a mammal by introducing into the genomic DNA of that mammal a new exogenous DNA sequence that serves to interrupt some portion of the endogenous DNA sequence to be suppressed. Another term for this type of suppression is "knockout". Thus, the exogenous

nucleic acid is also referred to as a "knockout construct".

Typically, as described in the present invention, the knockout construct, in this case the plasmid or expression vector referred to as  $\alpha 3$  connexin targeting vector or p $\alpha 3$ -GZK 5 described below and in the Examples, is first prepared and then inserted into an embryonic stem cell in which the construct subsequently becomes integrated into that cells' genomic DNA, usually by the process of homologous recombination. The embryonic stem cell containing the 10 exogenous DNA is then subjected to selection methods as described in the Examples, for example, by selection for neomycin resistance. Selected resistant cells are then analyzed for the presence of a mutant allele. An embryonic stem cell containing a mutant allele is then injected into a 15 blastocyst that is implanted into the uterus of a pseudopregnant foster mother for integration into a developing embryo.

Offspring that are born to the foster mother are then screened for the presence of the mutant allele, for example, 20 as is described more completely in the Examples. Preferably, the mutant allele is present in the germ line allowing for the generation of homozygous mutant animals from crossing heterozygotic animals containing the desired mutant allele.

Exemplary teachings of the preparation of disrupted genes 25 and mammals containing such genes are provided in US Patent Nos. 5,553,178, 5,557,032 and 5,569,824, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference. The  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient non-human mammals of this invention are generated essentially as described in the outlined procedure 30 above and in the Examples. Another term for  $\alpha 3$  connexin is Cx46. Thus, the invention provides a mammal, preferably a mouse, and its progeny either containing a nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$



connexin protein or lacking functional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein altogether. The resultant mammal is referred to as a  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient mammal. The  $\alpha 3$  connexin deficiency is generated by the insertion of a nucleic acid sequence 5 comprising at least a portion of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene into the genome of the mammal. The inserted  $\alpha 3$  connexin nucleic acid sequence present in the genome is referred to as a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. Exemplary disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene nucleic acid sequences from non-human mammals are discussed in 10 Example 1.

In preferred embodiments, a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks at least one transmembrane-encoding region and more preferably two regions and most preferably four regions. In a further embodiment, an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks one or more 15 nucleotides in the protein coding region, the presence of which results in a nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein. In another embodiment, an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene contains one or more nucleotide substitutions, the presence of which also results in a nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein.

20 In another aspect, the invention provides a nucleic acid sequence corresponding to the above-described disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene operably linked to a plasmid vector also referred to as a targeting vector. A preferred plasmid comprises a nucleic acid sequence that is an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene 25 lacking four transmembrane domains. An  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid further comprises at least a selectable marker, preferably the gene encoding neomycin resistance. In other embodiments, an  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid also comprises a marker gene for use in detecting the presence of 30 an  $\alpha 3$  mutant allele in a mammal of this invention. A preferred marker gene encodes lacZ. A preferred disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-containing plasmid is the plasmid, designated

p $\alpha$ 3-GZK, on deposit with American Type Culture Collection having ATCC Accession Number 97848, the deposit of which is further described below and in Example 4. In further aspects, the invention provides an embryonic stem cell, preferably a 5 JS-1 or an ES cell, containing a disrupted  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene.

Exemplary expression systems comprising suitable vectors and host cells for use in the present invention are described in Example 1 and further supported by ICE-related US Patents 5,552,536, 5,578,705 and 5,654,146, the disclosures of which 10 are hereby incorporated by reference. Methods for introducing a disrupted  $\alpha$ 3 connexin nucleic acid into a recipient host cell is described in Example 1 and further supported by all of the above-identified US Patents, including those describing preparation of transgenic knock-outs.

15 The system and methods can be practiced with any non-human  $\alpha$ 3 connexin genes, and therefore the invention need not be limited to the example of the mouse models as described above. Furthermore, as previously discussed, a disrupted  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene is not limited to only one type of disruption in 20 which the four transmembrane-encoding regions have been deleted. Thus, any  $\alpha$ 3 gene disruption that results in the generation of a nonfunctional but present  $\alpha$ 3 connexin protein or that blocks the transcription or translation for such 25 protein is contemplated for use in generating an  $\alpha$ 3 connexin-deficient mammal.

2. Characterization of  $\alpha$ 3 Connexin Gene-Disrupted Non-Human Mammals

The introduction of a disrupted  $\alpha$ 3 connexin nucleic 30 acid of the present invention described above and in the Examples into a recipient host results in a transgenic non-human mammal having a disrupted  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene. As a result

of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene disruption, the non-human mammal exhibits unique characteristics summarized herein and further discussed in Example 1.

Although the absence of  $\alpha 3$  connexin had no obvious influence on the early stages of lens formation and the differentiation of lens fibers, the non-human mammals of this invention homozygous for the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene developed nuclear cataracts at the age of 2 to 3 weeks. Gap junctions containing  $\alpha 3$  connexin were found in the homozygous non-human mammals, but they could not compensate for the functional loss of  $\alpha 3$  connexin in the lens nucleus. The nuclear cataracts resulted from light scattering of high molecular weight aggregates formed by the lens proteins linked together via disulfide bonds. A significant amount of degraded crystallins, in particular a unique fragmentation of  $\gamma$ -crystallin, was present in the  $\alpha 3$  connexin (-/-) lenses indicating that proteolysis in the lens plays a critical role in the cataractogenesis of the  $\alpha$ , (-/-) mice.

Thus, in the present invention, the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene is shown to be essential for providing a cell-cell signaling pathway or structural component for maintaining the organization of lens membrane and cytoplasmic proteins that is required for normal lens transparency. Further, the invention provides the discovery that a loss of  $\alpha 3$  connexin initiates a process in the lens that may involve an apoptosis pathway.

C. Therapeutic Compositions and Methods to Prevent or Treat Cataracts with Inhibitors of Interleukin-1 $\beta$  Converting Enzyme Activity

The discovery of the  $\gamma$ -crystallin degradation in the lenses of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene-disrupted non-human mammals of the present invention provides for therapeutic compositions

and methods of use thereof for affecting growth of cataracts in a subject mediated by loss of  $\alpha 3$  protein, nonfunction of  $\alpha 3$  protein or a degradation of critical crystallin lens proteins. Thus, as discussed in Example 2, a prophylactically or 5 therapeutically effective cataract growth affecting amount of an interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) inhibitor administered to a subject patient. A cataract growth affecting amount of an inhibitor of this invention is any amount that is effective at inhibiting the formation of 10 cataracts in a subject predisposed to cataract formation, such as in the  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient mammal described herein. Thus, the inhibitor acts prophylactically at preventing cataract formation. In other aspects, a cataract growth affecting amount is any amount that is effective at altering 15 the progression of cataract formation including delaying the complete formation of a cataract, inhibiting the complete formation of a cataract, and reversing a progressing or a completely formed cataract.

An inhibitor of the present invention is one that 20 functions to inhibit the degradation of the lens crystallin proteins, preferably  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein. Accordingly, inhibitory compounds of this invention are capable of targeting and inhibiting degradation of lens proteins, the degradation of which plays a critical role in cataract 25 development. Such inhibitors include but are not limited to inhibitors of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) and analogs thereof. Known ICE inhibitors are well known to those of skill in the art and include but are not limited to Bcl2, Bcl-XL, CrmA (cowpox virus protein), ZVAD-fluoromethylketone (a 30 permeant ICE inhibitor), lactacystin, dichloroisocoumarin, peptides Ac-YVAD-CMK and CPP32/Yama, and DEVD-CHO, and those described in US Patents 5,656,627, 5,552,536, 5,672,500 and

5,654,146, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

Exemplary teachings of therapeutic compositions and methods of administration applicable to the present invention 5 are also provided in ICE-related US Patents 5,578,705 and 5,656,627, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

For treatment, the candidate inhibitor is administered orally, intravenously, topically, or the like routes. For 10 topical administration to the eye, the compound is preferably provided in association with an ophthalmalogically acceptable carrier. Preferred ophthalmological modalities are provided in US Patents 5,401,880, 5,422,376, 5,519,054, 5,578,578 and 5,628,801, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by 15 reference.

The effect of the inhibitor is evaluated most easily by direct examination of the lens optometrically.

Thus, the compounds of this invention may be employed in a conventional manner for the treatment of cataractogenesis 20 mediated by the disruption of  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene, loss or nonfunction of  $\alpha$ 3 connexin protein and degradation of lens proteins. Such methods of treatment, their dosage levels and requirements may be selected by those of ordinary skill in the art from available methods and techniques. For example, a 25 compound of this invention may be combined with an acceptable pharmaceutical carrier or an ophthalmalogically acceptable carrier for a time period and in an amount effective to affect cataract growth in a subject. Alternatively, the inhibitors of this invention may be used in compositions and methods for 30 treating or protecting a subject against cataractogenesis over extended periods of time. An inhibitor may be employed in such compositions either alone or together with other

inhibitors of this invention in a manner consistent with the conventional utilization of ICE inhibitors in pharmaceutical compositions. For example, an inhibitor of this invention may be combined with pharmaceutically acceptable carriers 5 conventionally employed in vaccines and administered in prophylactically effective amounts to protect individuals over an extended period time against acquiring cataracts.

The inhibitors of this invention may also be co-administered with other ICE inhibitors to increase the 10 effect of therapy or prophylaxis against cataractogenesis. When the inhibitors of this invention are administered in combination therapies with other agents, they may be administered sequentially or concurrently to the subject. Alternatively, pharmaceutical or prophylactic compositions 15 according to this invention may be comprised of a combination of an ICE inhibitor of this invention and another therapeutic or prophylactic agent.

Pharmaceutical and ophthalmological compositions of this invention comprise any of the compounds of the present 20 invention, and pharmaceutically/ophthalmalogically acceptable salts thereof, with any pharmaceutically acceptable carrier, adjuvant or vehicle. As used herein, the terms "pharmaceutically acceptable", "ophthalmalogically acceptable", "physiologically tolerable" and grammatical variations 25 thereof, as they refer to compositions, carriers, diluents and reagents, are used interchangeably and represent that the materials are capable of administration to or upon a mammal without the production of undesirable physiological effects such as burning, irritation, shock, nausea, dizziness, gastric 30 upset and the like. The preparation of a pharmacological composition that contains active ingredients dissolved or dispersed therein is well understood in the art and need not

be limited based on formulation.

Pharmaceutically/ophthalmalogically acceptable carriers, adjuvants and vehicles that may be used in the pharmaceutical compositions of this invention include, but are not limited 5 to, ion exchangers, alumina, aluminum stearate, lecithin, serum proteins, such as human serum albumin, buffer substances such as phosphates, glycine, sorbic acid, potassium sorbate, partial glyceride-mixtures of saturated vegetable fatty acids, water, salts or electrolytes, such as protamine 10 sulfate, disodium hydrogen phosphate, potassium hydrogen phosphate, sodium chloride, zinc salts, colloidal silica, magnesium trisilicate, polyvinyl pyrrolidone, cellulose-based substances, polyethylene glycol, sodium carboxy-methylcellulose, polyacrylates, waxes, polyethylene- 15 polyoxypropylene-block polymers, polyethylene glycol and wool fat.

The pharmaceutical compositions of this invention may be administered orally, parenterally, by inhalation spray, topically, rectally, nasally, buccally, vaginally or via an 20 implanted reservoir. The preferred route is topically directly to the eye for either pharmaceutical or ophthalmalogical formulations. Such formulations are well known in the art using suitable dispersing or wetting agents and suspending agents. The formulations are preferably sterile 25 solutions or suspensions in a non-toxic parenterally-acceptable diluent or solvent, for example, as a solution in 1,3-butanediol. Among the acceptable vehicles and solvents that may be employed are mannitol, water, Ringer's solution and isotonic sodium chloride solution. In addition, 30 sterile, fixed oils are conventionally employed as a solvent or suspending medium. For this purpose, any bland fixed oil may be employed including synthetic mono- or

diglycerides. Fatty acids, such as oleic acid and its glyceride derivatives are useful in the preparation of injectables, as are natural pharmaceutically-acceptable oils, such as olive oil or castor oil, especially in their 5 polyoxyethylated versions.

A therapeutically effective amount of large molecule inhibitors of this invention is typically an amount such that when administered in a physiologically tolerable composition is sufficient to achieve a plasma concentration of from about 10 0.01 microgram ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) per milliliter (ml) to about 100  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ , preferably from about 1  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$  to about 5  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ , and usually about 5  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ . Stated differently, the dosage can vary from about 0.1 mg/kg to about 300 mg/kg, preferably from about 0.2 mg/kg to about 200 mg/kg, most preferably from about 0.5 mg/kg 15 to about 20 mg/kg, in one or more dose administrations daily, for one or several days.

A therapeutically effective amount of a small molecule inhibitors of this invention is typically an amount of polypeptide such that when administered in a physiologically 20 tolerable composition is sufficient to achieve a plasma concentration of from about 0.1 microgram ( $\mu\text{g}$ ) per milliliter (ml) to about 200  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ , preferably from about 1  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$  to about 150  $\mu\text{g}/\text{ml}$ . Based on a polypeptide having a mass of about 500 grams per mole, the preferred plasma concentration 25 in molarity is from about 2 micromolar ( $\mu\text{M}$ ) to about 5 millimolar (mM) and preferably about 100  $\mu\text{M}$  to 1 mM polypeptide antagonist. Stated differently, the dosage per body weight can vary from about 0.1 mg/kg to about 300 mg/kg, and preferably from about 0.2 mg/kg to about 200 mg/kg, in one 30 or more dose administrations daily, for one or several days.

D. Screening Methods to Identify Inhibitors of Interleukin-1 $\beta$  Converting Enzyme Activity Useful in Preventing or Treating Cataracts

The discoveries of the present invention also provide a variety of screening methods both *in vivo* and *in vitro*. In general, the screening methods are useful in identifying inhibitors of ICE or ICE-like activity occurring in the lens that may be responsible for the generation of cataract growth.

Thus, in one embodiment, a screening method to identify drugs that block, diminish or reverse the development or severity of cataracts relies on using the  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient mouse model of this invention. This method involves the administration of a candidate drug over a range of doses to the mouse by various routes of delivery, preferably by eye drops or intravencusly. Exemplary teachings are in Example 2.

In another screening method, the effect of a compound on a lens is also assessed through an *in vitro* system in which the lens of the mouse described above is cultured according to methods well known in the art for explant organ culture. The compound is directly applied to the medium in which the lens is cultured. Effects on opacification are assessed visually, morphologically or biochemically as previously described.

The present invention also describes methods to identify an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog. Inhibitors are identified with a variety of approaches. Two exemplary methods utilize the non-human mammal of the present invention and the discovery of the degradation pattern of the  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein as a result of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene disruption in the non-human mammal.

In one method, a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein is contacted with a solution of ICE or functional ICE analog to form a

mixture in the presence of a candidate inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions described in Example 1 for assessing cleavage patterns of  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The effect of the inhibitor is then assessed by comparing the cleavage patterns of untreated and treated samples. An effective inhibitor is identified with the presence of an altered cleavage pattern compared to that of undegraded  $\gamma$ -crystallin.

For these assays, the lens protein is in either purified or unpurified form. The ICE or functional ICE analog is either commercially obtained or is provided in a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human mammal as described in Example 1.

Another screening method to identify an inhibitor of ICE or a functional ICE analog is based on the use of an ICE or functional ICE homolog substrate well known to those of skill in the art of apoptosis. Exemplary ICE substrates include  $\gamma$ -crystallin and precursor interleukin-1 $\beta$  (pIL-1 $\beta$ ) and are described in US Patents 5,607,831 and 5,656,627, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference.

The substrate is mixed with a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human mammal prepared in Example 1. The homogenate contains ICE or functional ICE analog as described in Example 1 that results in the novel cleavage pattern of  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The above mixture is prepared in the presence of a candidate inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions where ICE or functional ICE analog is known to cleave the substrate generating detectable cleavage products. The cleavage pattern obtained with the test compound is compared to that with a control thereby identifying the effectiveness of the test compound as an inhibitor of the novel protease in the lens. Exemplary teachings of screening methods applicable to the present invention are provided in US Patents 5,656,627.

In a further aspect relating to the identification of an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog, the present invention contemplates a kit containing packaging means that include a first 5 container containing a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein in an amount sufficient for at least one assay, and further including a packaging material comprising a label indicating that the crystallin lens protein can be used to identify the inhibitor by detection of an altered cleavage pattern. Exemplary 10 teachings of the cleavage patterns are provided in the Examples. The enzymatic component of the kit is further provided in the form of a second container having ICE or functional ICE analog that is either commercially available or is present in a homogenate of lens isolated from a non-human 15 mammal of this invention. Preparation of such homogenates are detailed in the Examples.

The invention further contemplates a kit for identifying an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog in which a substrate, preferably a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein, of ICE or functional homolog and a 20 homogenate of lens isolated from a non-human mammal of this invention having disrupted alleles of  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene are provided in separate containers. The kit further contains a packaging material comprising a label indicating that the 25 crystallin lens protein can be used to identify the inhibitor by detection of an altered cleavage pattern.

#### Examples

The following examples relating to this invention are 30 illustrative and should not, of course, be construed as specifically limiting the invention. Moreover, such variations of the invention, now known or later developed,

which would be within the purview of one skilled in the art are to be considered to fall within the scope of the present invention hereinafter claimed.

5 1. Preparation and Characterization of a Non-Human Mammal

Having a Disrupted  $\alpha 3$  Connexin Gene

A. Experimental Procedures

1) Construction of  $\alpha 3$  Targeting Vector and Generation of  $\alpha 3$  Homozygous (-/-) Mice

10 In order to generate  $\alpha 3$  connexin knockout mice, an  $\alpha 3$  targeting vector containing a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene was prepared. Two  $\alpha 3$  connexin genomic clones encompassing a total of 25 kilobases (kb) of DNA sequence for the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene locus were isolated from a 129 FIX library (Stratagene, 15 La Jolla, CA) according to manufacturer's instructions. The full-length  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein, like all other members of this family, is encoded entirely within a single exon. The physical map of the wild type  $\alpha 3$  gene locus is shown in Figure 1A.

20 The nucleotide sequences of mouse, rat and bovine  $\alpha 3$  (also referred to as Cx46) connexin genes are available with the respective GenBank Accession Numbers U44955, X57970, and U08213. The nucleotide sequence of the mouse  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene is 2770 nucleotides with the protein coding sequence corresponding to nucleotide positions 388-1641. The 25 nucleotide coding sequence and translated amino acid sequence are shown in Figure 8 and listed in SEQ ID NO 1. Thus, the 5' untranslated sequence in the genomic sequence has been deleted for Figure 8. In this format, Figure 8 provides easy reference to the regions of the four transmembrane domains (TMDs) that occur approximately at amino acid residues 24-41, 30 77-94, 150-168, and 208-227. The nucleotide sequence regions

corresponding to the four TMDs in Figure 8 are the following respective nucleotide regions: 70-123, 229-282, 448-504, and 622-681. Homologous regions from other non-human mammalian species are readily determined as well known to one of ordinary skill in the art.

An isolated disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene nucleic acid sequence of the present invention can be prepared in many ways well known to one of ordinary skill in the art of gene expression and manipulation of DNA. Any methodology is acceptable such that the result is an absence of expression of  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein or an absence of expression of functional  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. In other words, either no protein is translated or a nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein is translated. Thus, for blocking the production of  $\alpha 3$  connexin altogether, the entire  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene can be deleted, while at the other extreme, a means to inhibit the transcription and translation of the protein are equally effective.

For preparing expressed but nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein, various regions of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein can be deleted at the nucleotide level thereby interfering with the ability of the protein to perform its intended function as a gap junction forming protein. In this aspect, the transmembrane domains of  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein are thought to be critical for the creation of functional gap junctions. As discussed above, four TMDs exist in  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein. At a minimum, a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene encoding a nonfunctional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein is generated by deletion of at least one TMD. Preferably, the disruption encompasses at least two TMDs and more preferably, four TMDs as described below. Approaches to effect a disruption of a TMD is to delete the corresponding nucleotide sequence or to insert a termination codon. An alternative approach is to delete a region and replace with an

exogenous sequence. This approach was used as described below in which the reporter lacZ-nls sequence was inserted at approximately nucleotide positions shown in Figure 8 from 73 through 681 effecting a deletion of four TMDs while terminating the translation of the remainder of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. Note that the nucleotide position numbers are not identical to those in the GenBank sequence as the 5' untranslated sequence has been deleted for convenience in referring to regions of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene and encoded protein. Primers as described below were designed from the complete GenBank sequence.

To prepare a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene as shown in Figure 1A, two fragments from the genomic clones were obtained by restriction digest. As a result, an internal deletion corresponding to the region encoding four transmembrane domains of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein was generated in exon 2 of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. The nucleotide region between the Hgi AI site and the downstream Apa I site in the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene coding region was eliminated as a result of the cloning procedures outlined herein.

A 4 kb Eco RI-Hgi AI  $\alpha 3$  fragment for  $\alpha 3$  connexin containing 5' untranslated sequence along with sequence encoding the first 17 amino acid residues was ligated in-frame with the nuclear location sequence (nls) and a lacZ reporter gene (Bonnerot et al., Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA, 84:6795-6799 (1987) through a linker sequence. This cloning procedure to obtain the resultant vector, referred to as p $\alpha 3$ -GlacZn, was performed through intermediate vectors p $\alpha 3$ -GL and pLacF, the latter of which provided the lacZ sequence. The vector p $\alpha 3$ -GlacZn was then digested with Not I to release a fragment containing the 5' end of  $\alpha 3$  fragment operably linked to the lacZ-encoding sequence. This  $\alpha 3$ -lacZ fragment was inserted

into a similarly digested expression vector referred to as pPNT (Tybulewicz et al., Cell, 65:1153-1163 (1991)).

To complete the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin vector, a 3.7 kb Apa I-Hind III  $\alpha 3$  fragment containing the rest of exon 2 from the genomic clones was isolated and then inserted into the 5 BamHI site of pPNT containing the 5' end of the gene by blunt end ligation to generate the  $\alpha 3$  connexin targeting vector. As a result of the ligation sites into the pPNT vector, the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene regions were separated by a pGK-neomycin gene.

10 The resultant vector, designated p $\alpha 3$ -GZK, is shown in Figure 1A with the respective indicated inserts described above.

The p $\alpha 3$ -GZK vector was deposited with the American Type Culture Collection as described in Example 4.

Alternative expression vectors are used to prepare 15 disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin vectors for use in generating non-human mammals having a mutant allele for a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene. Alternative constructs for generating an  $\alpha 3$  connexin deficiency are generated by the insertion into a non-human mammal of a nucleic acid sequence comprising at least a portion of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene into the genome of the mammal. 20 Other disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene constructions lack at least one transmembrane-encoding region, one or more nucleotides in the protein coding region of exon 2, or lack one or more nucleotides in the protein coding region. These constructs 25 are readily obtained by using procedures described herein as well as those known to one of ordinary skill in the art.

The targeting plasmids prepared above were then transfected into J1 embryonic stem cells (ES) by electroporation. Neomycin-resistant clones were verified by 30 Southern blot. Two of these  $\alpha 3$  knockout clones were injected into C57BL/6J blastocysts to produce chimeras as described (Li

et al., *Cell*, 69:915-926 (1992)). Male chimeras were used as founders to breed F1 hybrids with C57BL/6J female mice. F2 mice were generated from the intercross between  $\alpha 3$  heterozygous (+/-) F1 mice.

5 For Southern blot analysis, the DNA was isolated from ES cells or from mouse tails, then digested with Bam HI. A 900 base pair (bp) Eco RI fragment (probe A in Figure 1A), next to the 5' homologous region in the  $\alpha 3$  gene locus was used as the probe to examine the size of the wild type or  $\alpha 3$  gene disrupted alleles. The procedure for Southern blot analysis followed the protocol provided by the manufacturer (GeneScreenplus membranes, NEN Research Products). Three primers were used for PCR to examine the wild type or  $\alpha 3$  mutant alleles: the oligo deoxyribonucleotide 5'-  
10 CCCAGGCTCTACCTCAGGTT3' (SEQ ID NO 2) was used as a 5' primer for detecting both the wild type allele and the  $\alpha 3$  knockout allele; the oligo deoxyribonucleotide (5'-  
15 CTTTGGCCGATGACTGTAGAG-3' (SEQ ID NO 3) was used as the 3' primer for detecting the wild type gene allele; and the oligo  
20 deoxyribonucleotide (5'-CAGGGTTTCCCAGTCACGAC-3' (SEQ ID NO 4) from the lacZ gene sequence was used as the 3' primer for detecting the  $\alpha 3$  gene disrupted allele. The expected PCR products from the wild type allele or the  $\alpha 3$  disrupted allele, respectively, were a 350 bp or a 500 bp band.

25 For Northern blot analysis, total RNAs were isolated from 10 to 14 lenses per group from  $\alpha 3$  (+/+), (+/-), or (-/-) mice at the age of one month, by the CsCl method (Sambrook et al., Molecular Cloning, A Laboratory Manual, S. Edition, ed: CSH, (1989)). The Northern blot analysis followed the protocol  
30 provided by the manufacturer (GeneScreenplus membranes, NEN Research Products). An  $\alpha 3$  cDNA probe, a 0.8 kb Hgi A1 to Apa I fragment encoding the four transmembrane domains of the  $\alpha 3$

connexin protein, was used for hybridization.

2) LacZ Staining, Histological and Immunocytochemical Analysis

5           The lacZ staining method was carried out as described (Bonnerot and Nicolas, In Methods of Enzymology, P.M. Wassarman and M.L. DePamphilis, eds., pp. 451-469 (1993)). Lenses from embryos or newborn mice were prepared by using a standard histological method for paraffin-section and 10 hematoxylin and eosin staining. Lenses from adult mice were fixed in 2.5% glutaraldehyde in 0.1 M sodium cacodylate buffer for 5 days, and than embedded in LR white resin. Sections were stained with methylene blue. For immunocytochemical staining, mouse eyes were fixed with fresh 4% formaldehyde in 15 phosphate-buffered saline (PBS) for 30 minutes, then washed with PBS twice, and soaked overnight in 30% sucrose in PBS. Afterwards, the samples were processed by using a standard frozen-section method and analyzed with different antibodies as described (Risek et al., Develop. Biol., 164:183-196 20 (1994)). The distribution of antigen was analyzed by laser scanning confocal microscopy (Bio-Rad, C600). For freeze-fracture electron microscopy, the lenses were fixed in 2.5% glutaraldehyde in 0.1 M sodium cacodylate buffer for 5 days, then processed and analyzed as described previously (Risek et 25 al., id., (1994)).

3) Gel Filtration Analysis

Fresh lenses were dissected from the mice, and homogenized in 0.1 M NaCl, 50 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub> (pH 7.0) at 40 mg lens 30 wet weight/ml solution. The soluble fraction was collected after 15 minutes of centrifugation at 15000 rpm, and filtered through a microfilterfuge tube (0.45 µm NYLON-66, Rainin).

Gel filtration analysis was then carried out on a Pharmacia-LCC 500 instrument with a Superose 6 HR 10/30 column. The elution buffer was 50 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>, 0.1 M NaCl (pH 7.0).

5           4) Biochemical and Western Blot Analysis

To prepare the NaOH-insoluble protein samples, lenses were dissected from both eyes of an animal, and homogenized in 0.5 ml of 20 mM NaOH and 1 mM Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>. The insoluble pellet was collected after centrifugation at 15000 rpm for 15 minutes, washed once with the same solution, and then washed once with 1 mM Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>. The insoluble pellets were then dissolved in an equal volume of sample buffer (60 mM Tris, pH 6.8, 2% SDS, 10% glycerol and 0.001% bromophenol blue) with or without 10 mM DTT. When DTT was omitted to avoid reducing proteins to subunits, 10 mM iodoacetamide was included to prevent disulfide interchange.

To prepare the lens samples for Western Blot analysis, each lens was separated into two parts: a lens nucleus (around 60% of total lens wet weight) and a lens cortex (the remaining part). The lens cortex was dissolved in sample buffer containing 10 mM DTT; this is referred to as the total lens cortex proteins. The lens nucleus was extracted three times with 0.1 M NaCl, 50 mM Na<sub>2</sub>HPO<sub>4</sub>; the supernatant represented the total water-soluble proteins in the nucleus. The insoluble pellet was further extracted three times with 20 mM NaOH, 1 mM Na<sub>2</sub>CO<sub>3</sub>; this supernatant represented the NaOH-soluble protein. Finally, the insoluble pellet was dissolved in sample buffer with 10 mM DTT, and this is denoted as the NaOH-insoluble proteins. All samples for Western blot analysis were dissolved in loading buffer with 10 mM DTT.

The 9 and 11 kilodalton (kDa) degraded  $\gamma$ -crystallins were separated from the NaOH-insoluble proteins of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses

by a 4-20% polyacrylamide pre-cast gradient gel (Novex) and transferred to a PVDF (BioRad) membrane. N-terminal sequence analysis was performed by Edman degradation on a Perkin-Elmer/Applied Biosystems Model 494A sequencer.

5

#### B. Results

##### 1) Production of an $\alpha 3$ Knockout Mouse

As previously discussed, the physical maps of the wild type  $\alpha 3$  gene locus, the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene targeting vector ( $p\alpha 3\text{-GZK}$ ), and the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  gene locus are schematically shown in Figure 1A. This targeting plasmid,  $p\alpha 3\text{GZK}$ , was then transfected into J1 embryonic stem cells (ES cells). Eighteen out of 240 neomycin-resistant clones were confirmed to have undergone homologous recombination of their DNA as determined by Southern blot analysis. A 12 kb band that corresponds to the  $\alpha 3$  wild type allele and a 5.5 kb band to the mutant allele were detected (Figure 1B). Two independent ES cell clones whose DNA showed the 5.5 kb band were used to generate 11 male chimeras. Genomic DNA from both F1 and F2 mice was analyzed by Southern blot (Figure 1C) or PCR (Figure 1D). The  $\alpha 3$  connexin genotype from 196 F1 and 312 F2 mice followed Mendelian rules (data not shown). Both  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice were as viable and fertile as wild type. The connexin  $\alpha_3$  transcripts were detectable in  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) mice, but not  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) (Figure 1E). The level of  $\alpha 3$  connexin transcripts in  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) mice was 40 to 70% of that of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice as measured by densitometry, consistent with the presence of only one connexin gene allele in the heterozygotes.

2) Expression Pattern of the lacZ-nls Reporter Gene During Lens Development

Analysis of the expression pattern of the lacZ-nls gene, which contains a nuclear localization signal, from both  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) mice showed that lacZ-nls activity was first detected in the primary lens fiber cells of the embryos at stage 11 dpc, and in the secondary fibers throughout the life of the mice. Whole-mount staining for  $\beta$ -galactosidase from  $\alpha 3$  (++) ,  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) embryos at stage 14 dpc is shown (Figure 2A: left embryo,  $\alpha 3$  (++) ; middle embryo,  $\alpha 3$  (-/-); right embryo,  $\alpha 3$  (+/-)). A typical lacZ staining histological section along the lens equatorial plane of an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) embryo at stage 14 dpc is also shown (Figure 2B). The  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) embryos contained an identical lacZ staining pattern in the lens as in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) embryos, but the level of staining was lower than in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-). In sections from the lens of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice at the age of two weeks,  $\beta$ -galactosidase activity was detected in the nuclei of lens fiber cells, and also at a lower level in the nuclei of lens epithelial cells (Figure 2C, arrows). The newly formed secondary fiber cells in the bow region showed the highest intensity of staining. In the deep cortical and nuclear region the lacZ staining decreased and eventually disappeared probably due to the elimination of the cell nuclei along with other intracellular organelles during maturation of the lens fiber cells. A low level of  $\beta$ -galactosidase activity was also detected in the tip of the limbs during embryonic stages 11.5 to 14.5 dpc and in the dorsal root ganglion cells after stage 13.5 dpc (data not shown).

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3) Histological Analysis of Lens Development

Lens development of the  $\alpha 3$  (++) ,  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and

$\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice was examined by standard histological methods. From embryonic stage 11 dpc to postnatal day 3, no significant morphological changes were found in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice. Typical examples are shown in the histological sections from an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) (Figure 2D) and an  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) (Figure 2E) embryo at stage 18.5 dpc. However, beginning at 2-3 weeks of age, and increasing with age, an abnormal punctate light scattering was observed with a dissection microscope in the nuclear region of the lenses from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice. This nuclear cataract was observed in the lenses of all the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice examined; i.e., it had a 100% penetrance. The degree of the nuclear opacity varied somewhat among individual mice, but the nuclear cataracts in the two lenses from the same mouse were identical. No nuclear cataracts were observed in  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) mice up to the age of 8 months.

Figure 3A contains an  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lens and an  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lens from mice at the age of 2 months. The light scattering opacity in the lens is commonly referred to as a cataract. The cataract in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses resulted from the light scattering of many aggregates in the lens nucleus; the lens cortex remained transparent. Histological analysis of the cortical fibers in the sections from the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) cataract lens showed normal morphology with no swelling (Figure 3B), but regions with aggregated material (arrow) were observed in the nuclear region (Figure 4A).

4) Characterization of  $\alpha 3$  and  $\alpha 8$  Connexins in the Lens

The localization of  $\alpha 3$  and  $\alpha 8$  connexin proteins in the mouse lens membrane was characterized by using an anti- $\alpha 3$  connexin peptide antibodies and anti- $\alpha 8$  connexin monoclonal antibodies. In the lens cortex of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice,  $\alpha 3$  (Figure

4B, left green panel) and  $\alpha$ 8 (Figure 4B, right red panel) connexins were colocalized to the same plaques (Figure 4B, middle orange panel), and they were located on the broad side of the membranes of the hexagonal fibers. In the cortex of  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice, the plaque-like staining signals for  $\alpha$ 8 connexin on the broad side of the membranes of hexagonal lens fibers were still present (Figure 4C, right panel), but the  $\alpha$ 3 connexin protein was undetectable (Figure 4C, left panel). The plaque-like staining signals of  $\alpha$ 3 connexin appeared to fade away more steeply from the superficial cortex to the deep cortex in the  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice than in the  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) mice.

5) Electron Microscopic Analysis of the Lens Membranes

15 Gap junction plaques were observed by freeze-fracture electron microscopy in both normal and  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice, and they were compared in membranes of superficial cortical fibers of lenses from 3 week old mice (Figure 5A). In both animals, the gap junctions exhibited similar pleomorphic variations in plaque sizes and distributions. However, the 20 gap junction particles in the  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lens cortex appeared to be packed less tightly (Figure 5B) than those in the  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) lens cortex (Figure 5A), based on a qualitative analysis. In the lens nuclear region, however, the normal polygonal arrays 25 of furrowed membrane structures seen in  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) mice (Figure 5C) were completely disrupted in  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lenses (Figure 5D). Strikingly, large areas of continuous square arrays of 5 to 6 nm particles were often detected in the deep cortex and nucleus of  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lenses (Figure 5F). In contrast, 30 particles in square arrays in the membranes of the  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) lens nucleus were found as small islands mixed with 9 to 11 nm particles (Figure 5E).

6) Lens Growth Rate and Weight

The wet weight of lenses from  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice from the age of 3 weeks to 1 year is presented in Figure 6A. There was no significant change in the lens growth rate between  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and (-/-) mice after birth. Although the average lens weight from the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice was 10% less than their wild-type littermates after one year, this difference is within the standard deviation.

10

7) Characterization of Crystallin Proteins

The total water-soluble protein in lenses from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-),  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) littermates at different ages was determined by gel filtration. Since more than 90% of the water-soluble protein in the normal lens consists of  $\alpha$ ,  $\beta$  and  $\gamma$ -crystallins, the focus was on these proteins. At the age of two weeks,  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice had elution profiles that were identical to those of  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) littermates (data not shown). However, by two months of age,  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice had 15% less water-soluble protein than their  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) littermates, although the lenses were identical in wet weight. The elution profiles indicate that the loss of water-soluble  $\gamma$ -crystallin proteins in the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice accounts for most of the deficit (Figure 6B). By 4 months of age, there was a reduction of 30% in the quantity of water soluble proteins in the lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice compared to the  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice. The elution profiles from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses indicated that this was due to the loss of not only  $\gamma$ -crystallins, but also  $\alpha$ - and  $\beta$ -crystallins (Figure 6C). Lenses selected for the same total wet weight from 4 month old  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) littermates were separated into cortex and nucleus before extraction and analysis. The elution profiles indicated no significant changes of water-soluble

crystallins in the cortex of the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice compared to  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) mice (Figure 6D); a significant loss of the water soluble  $\alpha$ -,  $\beta$ - and  $\gamma$ -crystallins occurred only in the nucleus (Figure 6E).

5 In general, the proteins that remain insoluble after extraction of normal lenses with 20 mM NaOH in 1 mM  $\text{Na}_2\text{CO}_3$  solution are membrane proteins. These NaOH-insoluble proteins from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-),  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lenses at the age of 2 months were analyzed by Coomassie blue stained SDS-PAGE  
10 (Figure 7A). The major NaOH-insoluble protein band from  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) lenses was located at the position corresponding to the major lens membrane protein, MP26 (Figure 7A, lanes 1-4). There was a 5- to 10-fold increase in the total amount of NaOH-insoluble protein in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses  
15 compared to  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) and  $\alpha 3$  (+/+) lenses. The NaOH-insoluble proteins of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses were analyzed by SDS-PAGE in the presence and absence of DTT. After treatment with DTT, most of these insoluble proteins were located between 17 and 27 kDa  
20 (Figure 7A, lane 5); much less protein was detected in the same range when the insoluble proteins were not treated with DTT (Figure 7A, lane 6). This is likely due to the fact that the NaOH-insoluble proteins from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses consisted of high molecular weight aggregates of lens proteins linked together via disulfide-bonds *in vivo*; without DTT treatment,  
25 these aggregates were not able to enter a 5% polyacrylamide gel.

Lenses were physically dissected to obtain nuclear regions (around 60% of total lens weight) and cortical regions (the remaining 40%). The lens nuclear region was then  
30 subdivided into three fractions: water-soluble; NaOH-soluble; and NaOH-insoluble fractions. All fractions were analyzed on Western blots using antibodies against  $\alpha A$ -,

$\alpha$ B-,  $\beta$ 2- and  $\gamma$ -crystallin. Results of samples from 2 month old  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) and  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice are shown in Figure 7B. Only one significant difference was observed in the lens cortex: an increase in the cleaved form of  $\alpha$ B-crystallin in  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice (Figure 7B, lane 5) compared to  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) mice (Figure 7B, lane 1). In the lens nucleus, water-soluble  $\alpha$ A-,  $\alpha$ B-,  $\beta$ B2- and  $\gamma$ -crystallins from  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice (Figure 7B, lane 6) were similar to that of  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) mice (Figure 7B, lane 2). The NaOH-soluble proteins from both  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) and  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lens nuclei contained the cleaved forms of  $\alpha$ A- and  $\alpha$ B-crystallins (lane 3, and 7 in Figure 7B). However, no crystallins were detected in the NaOH-insoluble fraction prepared from the nuclear region of  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) lenses (Figure 7C, lane 4). In contrast, the pellet fraction from  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lenses contained a significant amount of the cleaved forms of  $\alpha$ A-crystallin,  $\alpha$ B-crystallin,  $\beta$ B2-crystallin, the intact form of  $\gamma$ -crystallin and an 11 kDa cleaved form of  $\gamma$ -crystallin (Figure 7B, lane 8 indicated by arrows). Thus, most of the NaOH-insoluble proteins of  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lenses in lane 5 of Figure 7A were likely to be insoluble crystallins since they migrated in the range of 17 to 27 kDa.

Most of the cleaved forms of  $\alpha$ A- and  $\alpha$ B-crystallin in the  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lens were similar to the sizes of the cleaved products of  $\alpha$ A- and  $\alpha$ B-crystallins in the  $\alpha$ 3 (+/+) lens nucleus. However, a unique 11 kDa cleaved  $\gamma$ -crystallin band was detected only in the nuclear region of  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) lenses, where it comprised 5-10% of the total insoluble  $\gamma$ -crystallin in the 1 month old cataract lens. The 11 kDa  $\gamma$ -crystallin fragment was first detected in the lenses of 3 week old  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice, and its detection was correlated with the appearance of the nuclear cataract. The degree of nuclear opacity was directly related to the detectable quantity of

this 11 kDa  $\gamma$ -crystallin fragment (data not shown).

Two  $\gamma$ -crystallin fragments (indicated by arrows in Figure 7A, lane 5), the 11 kDa fragment and a second band of 9 kDa, were purified by 4-20% PAGE from the NaOH-insoluble proteins 5 of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses. The N-terminal sequence of the 11 kDa fragment was identified by Edman degradation to be SI(V)RSFR which is similar to residues 74 to 79 in  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The N-terminal sequence of the 9 kDa fragment was GKIFY, identical to the N-terminal sequence of intact  $\gamma$ -crystallins.

10 Therefore, it is reasonable to predict that a cleavage site for  $\gamma$ -crystallins is located between Asp73-Ser74. A single proteolytic cleavage at this position would generate two fragments with the same precise sizes and the identical N-terminal sequences observed in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses.

15

### C. Discussion

In the present invention, the  $\alpha 3$  (Cx46) connexin gene was disrupted in mice by homologous recombination. Mice homozygous (-/-) for the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  gene developed a nuclear 20 cataract that resembled the age-dependent senile cataracts in humans. This phenotype, based on the function of gap junctions, results from alterations in cell-cell signaling pathways. In addition, it was observed that the  $\alpha 3$  heterozygous (+/-) and homozygous (-/-) knockout mice were 25 viable and fertile, and the early stages of lens formation and differentiation appeared to be normal.

Morphological and biochemical analysis of lenses from the homozygote mice indicated significant changes when compared to lenses from both heterozygote or normal mice. The phenotype 30 of these cataractous lenses were documented by histological, immunocytochemical and electron microscopic analysis. The biochemical analysis of these lenses indicate that the nuclear

cataract resulted from aggregation of lens proteins that are linked by disulfide bonds. Further, this aggregation of lens protein was initiated and facilitated by degradation of crystallins and, in particular  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The single specific cleavage site determined for  $\gamma$ -crystallin indicates that the protease involved is a potential member of the caspase family which have been implicated in apoptosis (Patel et al., FASEB J., 10:587-597 (1996)). Thus, in the present invention, the loss of  $\alpha 3$  connexin initiates a pathway in the lens that is normally involved in lens fibre maturation and which has common features to those found in apoptosis.

Although the precise relationship between the lack of  $\alpha 3$  connexin and cataractogenesis has not been defined, the results of the present invention indicates that cataractogenesis results from one of two potential functions for  $\alpha 3$  connexin. First, in the absence of  $\alpha 3$  connexin, the small molecules that are normally transmitted via the  $\alpha 3$  connexin pathways and that have a regulatory influence on the activity of molecules, such as proteases, are not able to pass from cell to cell. Consequently, the protease activity is not regulated normally so that fragmentation of molecules, such as the  $\gamma$ -crystallin, occurs abnormally to promote the cataract phenotype. Second, the  $\alpha 3$  connexin may make significant contribution as an integral membrane protein for lens membrane/cytoskeletal organization. In the absence of  $\alpha 3$  connexin in this superstructural organization, cytoplasmic proteins, such as the crystallins, are not able to maintain their normal relationship, thus creating the opacification.

The expression of the lacZ gene in the lens fibers of  $\alpha 3$  knockout mice indicates the cellular regions that contain expression of the promotor for the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene in mice. A similar expression of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene in the lens has

been seen in rat (Paul et al., J. Cell Biol., 115:1077-1089 (1991)), chick (Jiang et al., Develop. biol., 168:649-661 (1995)), and cow (Jarvis et al., Invest. Ophthalmol. & Vis. Sci., 34:613-620 (1993)). In addition, lacZ staining was 5 detected in embryos in both dorsal and ventral regions of the tip of the limb buds, the dorsal root ganglion cells, and the lens epithelial cells. These results implicate  $\alpha$ 3 connexin as a functional component of the cells in these regions during development. LacZ staining was not detectable in the adult 10 heart, even though  $\alpha$ 3 transcripts have been detected in RNA extracts from mouse (unpublished observation) and rat heart (Paul et al., supra, (1991)).

Morphological analysis of the lenses of  $\alpha$ 3 (-/-) mice indicate that this is not a typical osmotic-type cataract, 15 such as the diabetes cataract, (Bond et al., Invest. Ophthal. & Vis. Sci., 37:1557-1565 (1996)) or that found in the congenital MIP mouse (Bassnett and Shiels, Nat. Genet., 12::212-215 (1996)), in which swelling of the lens fibers has 20 been observed. Instead, cataracts in the mouse model of the present invention display morphological features comparable to those found in senile human cataracts (Al-Ghoul et al., Exp. Eye Res., 62:237-251 (1996)). As such, the present model and methods of use thereof is predictive of efficacy of therapeutic treatment of human cataractogenesis. Biochemical 25 data indicate that the nuclear cataracts result from the light scattering of high-molecular-weight insoluble aggregates of lens proteins formed by disulfide crosslinking between proteins. These types of changes have been reported also to occur in the human nuclear cataracts (Al-Ghoul et al., id., 30 (1996); Spector, In: The Ocular Lens, Structure, Function and Pathology. H. Maisel, Ed. New York, Marcel Dekker, Inc. pp. 4055-438 (1985)).

From a histological analysis and measurements of lens weight, the differentiation of the lens fiber cells and the early growth of the lens were not affected by the absence of  $\alpha 3$  connexin in the mice. However, the early onset of a 5 nuclear cataract in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice establishes that  $\alpha 3$  connexin is essential for maintenance of lens transparency. The slight reduction in the weight of the lenses from the older  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice was likely to be a consequence of the pathogenesis of the nuclear cataract. The cataractogenesis in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice is 10 unlikely to be due to lacZ protein expression for several reasons: a) previous studies have shown no evidence of cataract formation when the lacZ gene is highly expressed in the lens (Goring et al., Science, 235:456-458 (1987)); b) lacZ proteins were preferentially detected in the lens cortex, 15 where no cataracts were observed; c) lenses of  $\alpha 3$  (+/-) mice also expressed lacZ proteins in the lens, but exhibited no cataracts up to the age of 8 months.

Connexin  $\alpha 8$  has been reported to be cleaved at its C-terminus to generate a 35 kDa form in the rat lens (White et 20 al., Mol. Biol. Cell, 3:711-720 (1992); Lin et al., Eur. J. Cell Biol., 73:141-149 (1997)). The proteolytic processing of  $\alpha 8$  connexin is first detected in the lens nucleus of the mice at postnatal day 5 by immunocytochemical staining (Evans et al., Eur. J. Cell Biol., 60:243-249 (1993)). Thus, it is 25 possible that the intact  $\alpha 8$  connexin might be sufficient to compensate for the loss of  $\alpha 3$  connexin proteins during early lens development and in the differentiating fibers in the lens cortex. However, the fact that  $\alpha 8$  connexin did not compensate for the loss of  $\alpha 3$  in the lens nucleus might be due to the 30 proteolysis of  $\alpha 8$  connexin in the nuclear region.

The dispersed 9-11 nm particles shown in the right panel of figure 5E are likely to represent gap junction particle

aggregates in the lens deep cortex and nucleus (Costello et al., Ophthalm. & Vis. Sci., 30:975-989 (1989)) and these particles were often mixed among many small islands of square-array particles, thought to represent MIP channels that are formed by MP26 (Zampighi et al., J. Cell Biol., 108:2255-2275 (1989)). Square arrays have also been observed in several types of congenital and transgenic mouse models (Lo and Kuck, Curr. Eye Res., 6:433-444 (1987); Dunia et al., J. Cell Biol., 132:701-716 (1996)). The formation of square arrays has been correlated with the degradation of MP26 to MP22 (Costello et al., supra, (1989)). In contrast, square arrays have been observed in MDR3 transgenic mouse lenses in the absence of proteolytic degradation of MP26 (Dunia et al., supra, (1996)). No significant changes in the RNA and protein levels of MP26 and MP22 (the cleaved form of MP 26) were detected in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses (unpublished observations). The appearance of the large areas of square-array particles likely resulted from the significant reorganization of the membrane structure in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lens nucleus. This data suggests that  $\alpha 3$  connexin might also play a structural role in the organization of membrane protein and lipid.

Immunoblotting verified that the degradation of  $\gamma$ -crystallins was detected only in the lens nucleus of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice, where  $\gamma$ -crystallins are normally enriched (Siezen et al., J. Mol. Biol., 199:405-438 (1998)). Several congenital nuclear cataracts have been directly associated with the modification of one or more of the  $\gamma$ -crystallin genes. Activation of a  $\gamma E$ -crystallin pseudogene ( $\gamma E$  gene), which expressed a 6 kD N-terminal  $\gamma E$ -crystallin fragment, has been suggested to be the cause of the hereditary Coppock-like cataract in human (Brakenhoff et al., Human Mol. Genet., 3:279-283 (1994)). Degraded  $\gamma$ -crystallins in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice

are sufficient to initiate and accelerate the aggregation of the lens proteins in the nucleus to generate nuclear cataracts.

The putative cleavage site between Asp73 and Ser74 for  $\gamma$ -crystallins suggested in the present invention is different from that determined for a 9 kDa water-soluble  $\gamma D$  crystallin fragment in human lens (Srivastava and Srivastava, Exp. Eye Res., 62:593-604 (1996)). It has been reported that  $\gamma$ -crystallins are resistant to the calpain II protease (David and Shearer, Exp. Eye Res., 42:227-238 (1986)). Therefore the degradation of  $\gamma$ -crystallins as described in the present invention is caused by the action of another protease in the lens. Comparison of the Asp-Ser cleavage site of the  $\gamma$ -crystallin with known protease substrate specificities indicates that caspase proteases of the cysteine protease family (Nicholson et al., Nature, 376:37-43 (1995)) and granzyme B (Caputo et al., Nature Structural Biol., 1:364-367 (1994)) can cleave at an Asp-X site. Both proteases have been reported to play a critical role in apoptosis (Patel et al., supra, (1996)). Different members of the caspase family have been reported to be expressed in many different organs and cell types. The present invention thus describes a caspase-related protease responsible for the cleavage of  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The action of this enzyme may play an important role in both maturation of lens fibers in normal lenses and cataractogenesis in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses.

Apoptosis has been reported in the lens epithelial cells (Li et al., J. Cell Biol., 130:169-181 (1995)). The maturation of lens fiber cells to promote transparency includes complete degradation of all intracellular organelles including the nucleus, endoplasmic reticulum, and mitochondria. While this process resembles some features of

apoptosis (Chaudun et al., J. Cell Physiol., 158:354-364 (1994)), the molecular mechanisms involved in this process are poorly understood and are reported to differ from classical apoptosis (Bassnett and Mataic, J. Cell Biol., 137:37-49 (1997)).

The function of  $\alpha$ -crystallin as a chaperone protein that prevents denaturation and aggregation of crystallins *in vitro* (Rao et al., Biochim. Biophys. Acta, 1245:439-447 (1995)) and *in vivo* (Brady et al., Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci., USA, 94:844-889 (1997)) has been described. The profile of degraded  $\alpha$ -crystallins in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses was remarkably similar to that present within mature fibers normally. The putative cleavage site of  $\alpha B$  crystallin *in vivo* can be reproduced *in vitro* using calpain II protease (Yoshida et al., Ophthal. & Vis. Sci., 27:1269-1273 (1986)). Degradation of the C-terminus of  $\alpha$ -crystallins could reduce their chaperone function (Takemoto, Exp. Eye Res., 59:2399-242 (1994)). Calpain II has been reported to play a critical role in several cataract models (Shearer et al., Curr. Eye Res., 11:357-369 (1992); Mitton et al., J. Biol. Chem., 271:31803-31806 (1996); Truscott et al., Ophthal. & Vis. Sci., 31:2405-2411 (1990); Yoshida et al., Yoshida, Curr. Eye Res., 4:983-988 (1985). It is possible that calpain II may also be involved in the cataractogenesis of  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice. However, based on the evidence that extensive degradation of  $\alpha B$  crystallin was detected in the transparent cortex of the nuclear cataract lens from  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice, the degradation of  $\alpha B$  crystallin is not by itself sufficient to generate the opaque lens. Calpain II may be responsible for the degradation of  $\alpha B$ - and  $\beta$ -crystallin, but not  $\gamma$ -crystallin. Further, no degradation of  $\gamma$ -crystallin has been reported in cataract models mediated by the activation of calpain II (Mitton et al., J. Biol. Chem., 2271:31803-311806).

(1996); Shearer et al., Curr. Eye Res., 11:357-369 (1992); Truscott et al., supra, (1990); Yoshida et al., supra, (1985)). Thus, the observed degradation of  $\gamma$ -crystallin in  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) lenses is not a consequence of the activation of calpain 5 II. While ubiquitin has been found in macromolecular aggregates of crystallin (Jahngen-Hodge et al., Exp. Eye Res., 55:897-902 (1992)) its involvement in the generation of the cataract phenotype in the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mouse lens remains to be clarified.

10 Cataract formation is often associated with changes in the ionic balance in the lens, especially the homeostasis of calcium ions, which have an important role in the activation of proteolytic enzymes (Duncan et al., Prog. In Retinal & Eye Res., 13:623-652 (1994)). Indeed, gap junction channels might 15 be a major pathway for transporting calcium ions among the lens fiber cells.

In summary, the changes in the crystallins observed in the cataractogenesis of the  $\alpha 3$  (-/-) mice suggest that gap junctional channels in the lens transport metabolic substrates 20 (small molecules) that are ultimately important for the regulation of an unknown protease(s) and maintenance of the superstructural organization of lens proteins responsible for lens transparency. The morphological results in this study also suggest that  $\alpha 3$  connexin might have a structural role in 25 the organization of lens membrane components. Finally, the potential relevance of this mouse model for studying human cataracts is supported by the recent report that a human autosomal dominant cataract has been mapped to the same region on human chromosome 13 where the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene is located 30 (Mackay et al., J. Cell Biol., 130:169-181 (1997)).

2. Assays to Screen for Inhibitors of Cataract Growth and of Interleukin-1 $\beta$  Converting Enzyme (ICE)

A. Cataract Growth

The present invention contemplates methods both in vivo and *in vitro* for identifying inhibitors of cataract growth, either prophylactically or therapeutically. Thus, the methods are useful in identifying a compound that can prevent cataract formation, alter the progression of cataract formation by delay or inhibiting the complete formation of a cataract or effecting a reversal or regression of a cataract at any stage of formation.

One exemplary method is the application of a selected compound to the  $\alpha 3$  connexin-deficient mouse prepared in Example 1. Administration is effected topically or intravenously. The effect of the compound on growth of the cataract is then evaluated visually by observing a change in the amount of opacity as previously described in Example 1. Alternative ways to assess effects on cataract growth include the biological assays as described in Example 1 including morphological and biochemical analyses of lens isolated from the mouse having received compound applications.

The effect of a compound on a lens is also assessed through an *in vitro* system in which the lens of the mouse described above is cultured according to methods well known in the art for explant organ culture. The compound is directly applied to the medium in which the lens is cultured. Effects on opacification are assessed visually, morphologically or biochemically as previously described.

30 B. ICE Inhibitors

The present invention also describes methods to identify an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme

(ICE) or functional ICE analog. Inhibitors are identified with a variety of approaches. Two exemplary methods utilize the non-human mammal of the present invention and the discovery of the degradation pattern of the  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein as a result of the  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene disruption in the non-human mammal.

In one method, a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein is contacted with a solution of ICE or functional ICE analog to form a mixture in the presence of a candidate inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions described in Example 1 for assessing cleavage patterns of  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The effect of the inhibitor is then assessed by comparing the cleavage patterns of untreated and treated samples. An effective inhibitor is identified with the presence of an altered cleavage pattern compared to that of undegraded  $\gamma$ -crystallin.

For these assays, the lens protein is in either purified or unpurified form. The ICE or functional ICE analog is either commercially obtained or is provided in a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human mammal as described in Example 1.

Another screening method to identify an inhibitor of ICE or a functional ICE analog is based on the use of an ICE or functional ICE homolog substrate well known to those of skill in the art of apoptosis. Exemplary ICE substrates include  $\gamma$ -crystallin and precursor interleukin-1 $\beta$  (pIL-1 $\beta$ ) and are described in US Patents 5,607,831 and 5,656,627, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by reference. The substrate is mixed with a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human mammal prepared in Example 1. The homogenate contains ICE or functional ICE analog as described in Example 1 that results in the novel cleavage pattern of  $\gamma$ -crystallin. The above mixture is prepared in the presence of a candidate



inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions where ICE or functional ICE analog is known to cleave the substrate generating detectable cleavage products. The cleavage pattern obtained with the test compound is compared 5 to that with a control thereby identifying the effectiveness of the test compound as an inhibitor of the novel protease in the lens.

3. Application of Inhibitors of Interleukin-1 $\beta$  Converting Enzyme (ICE) to a Subject to Prevent or Treat Cataracts

10 The present invention contemplates methods of prophylactic or therapeutic treatment of cataract growth in a subject. Based on the present discovery of the unique  $\gamma$ -crystallin cleavage pattern in  $\alpha$ 3 connexin-deficient mammals and effects 15 on cataractogenesis as discussed in Example 1, a prophylactically or therapeutically effective cataract growth affecting amount of an interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) inhibitor administered to a subject patient. ICE inhibitors include but are not limited to the following molecules: Bcl2, 20 Bcl-XL, CrmA (cowpox virus protein), ZVAD-fluromethylketone (a permeant ICE inhibitor), lactacystin, dichloroisocoumarin, peptides Ac-YVAD-CMK and CPP32/Yama, and DEVD-CHO, and those described in US Patents 5,656,627, 5,552,536, 5,672,500 and 5,654,146, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by 25 reference.

For treatment, the candidate inhibitor is administered orally, intravenously, topically, or the like routes. For topical administration to the eye, the compound is preferably provided in association with an ophthalmologically acceptable 30 carrier. Preferred ophthalmological modalities are provided in US Patents 5,401,880, 5,422,376, 5,519,054, 5,578,578 and 5,628,801, the disclosures of which are hereby incorporated by

reference.

The effect of the inhibitor is evaluated most easily by direct examination of the lens optometrically.

5 4. Deposit of Materials

The following plasmid has been deposited on or before January 10, 1997, with the American Type Culture Collection, 1301 Parklawn Drive, Rockville, MD, USA (ATCC) :

10	<u>Material</u>	<u>ATCC Accession No.</u>
	plasmid p $\alpha$ 3-GZK	97848

This deposit was made under the provisions of the Budapest Treaty on the International Recognition of the  
15 Deposit of Microorganisms for the Purpose of Patent Procedure and the Regulations thereunder (Budapest Treaty). This assures maintenance of a viable plasmid for 30 years from the date of deposit. The deposit will be made available by ATCC under the terms of the Budapest Treaty which assures permanent  
20 and unrestricted availability of the progeny of the plasmid to the public upon issuance of the pertinent US patent or upon laying open to the public of any US or foreign patent application, whichever comes first, and assures availability of the progeny to one determined by the US Commissioner of  
25 Patents and Trademarks to be entitled thereto according to 35 U.S.C. §122 and the Commissioner's rules pursuant thereto (including 37 CFR §1.14 with particular reference to 886 OG 638). The assignee of the present application has agreed that if the plasmid deposit should die or be lost or destroyed when  
30 cultivated under suitable conditions, it will be promptly replaced on notification with a viable specimen of the same type. Availability of the deposited plasmid is not to be

construed as a license to practice the invention in contravention of the rights granted under the authority of any government in accordance with its patent laws.

The foregoing written specification is considered to be sufficient to enable one skilled in the art to practice the invention. The present invention is not to be limited in scope by the plasmid deposited, since the deposited embodiment is intended as a single illustration of one aspect of the invention and any transgenic mammals produced thereby that are functionally equivalent are within the scope of this invention. The deposit of material does not constitute an admission that the written description herein contained is inadequate to enable the practice of any aspect of the invention, including the best mode thereof, nor is it to be construed as limiting the scope of the claims to the specific illustration that it represents. Indeed, various modifications of the invention in addition to those shown and described herein will become apparent to those skilled in the art from the foregoing description and fall within the scope of the appended claims.

What Is Claimed Is:

1. An isolated nucleic acid sequence defining a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene.
- 5 2. The nucleic acid sequence of claim 1 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks at least one transmembrane-encoding domain.
- 10 3. The nucleic acid sequence of claim 1 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks four transmembrane-encoding domains.
- 15 4. A targeting vector comprising a nucleic acid sequence defining a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene.
5. The targeting vector of claim 4 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks at least one transmembrane-encoding domain.
- 15 6. The targeting vector of claim 4 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks four transmembrane-encoding domains.
- 20 7. The targeting vector of claim 6 comprising a plasmid having the ATCC Accession Number 97848.
8. The targeting vector of claim 4 further comprising a selectable marker.
9. The targeting vector of claim 8 wherein the selectable marker is a neomycin gene.
- 25 10. The targeting vector of claim 4 further comprising a marker sequence.
11. The targeting vector of claim 10 wherein the marker sequence is a *lacZ-nls* reporter gene.
- 30 12. A mutant non-human mammal wherein its endogenous  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene has been disrupted by homologous recombination using an exogenous targeting vector comprising a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene.

13. The mammal of claim 12 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks at least one transmembrane-encoding domain.

14. The mammal of claim 12 wherein the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene lacks four transmembrane-encoding domains.  
5

15. The mammal of claim 14 wherein the transmembrane-encoding domains are replaced with a *lacZ-nls* reporter gene.

16. The mammal of claim 15 wherein the targeting vector  
10 comprises a plasmid having the ATCC Accession Number 97848.

17. The mammal of claim 16 wherein the mammal is a mouse.

18. The mammal of claim 12 wherein the disruption prevents the expression of functional  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein.

19. The mammal of claim 12 wherein the disruption  
15 prevents the expression of  $\alpha 3$  connexin protein.

20. The mammal of claim 12 wherein the disruption is introduced into the mammal or an ancestor of the mammal at an embryonic stage, and wherein the disruption results in the development of a cataract in an  $\alpha 3$  homozygous (-/-) mammal.  
20

21. A method for producing a non-human mammal containing a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  connexin gene, the method comprising:

a) integrating, via homologous recombination, the targeting vector of claim 4 into a non-human mammalian  $\alpha 3$  target gene present in an embryonic stem cell to form a recombinant non-human mammalian disrupted  $\alpha 3$  target gene in an allele in the stem cell;  
25

b) selecting a stem cell containing the disrupted  $\alpha 3$  gene in an allele;

30 c) producing a viable non-human mammal containing a disrupted  $\alpha 3$  gene in an allele.

22. The method of claim 21 wherein the non-human mammal

is an  $\alpha 3$  homozygous (-/-) mammal.

23. A method to identify a compound for use in affecting growth of a cataract, the method comprising:

- a) administering the compound to a lens of a non-human mammal of claim 12, and
- 5 b) evaluating the effect of the compound on growth of the cataract.

24. The method of claim 23 wherein the compound is topically applied to an eye of the non-human mammal.

10 25. The method of claim 24 wherein the topical administration is in association with an ophthalmalogically acceptable carrier.

15 26. The method of claim 22 wherein the compound is administered in association with an acceptable pharmaceutical carrier.

27. The method of claim 26 wherein the compound is administered intravenously to the non-human mammal.

28. The method of claim 22 wherein the non-human mammal is an  $\alpha 3$  heterozygous (+/-) mammal.

20 29. The method of claim 22 wherein the lens is cultured *in vitro*.

30. The method of claim 29 wherein the compound is administered to the cultured lens.

31. The method of claim 22 wherein the affected growth 25 is formation of a cataract.

32. The method of claim 31 wherein the compound is administered prior to the formation of a cataract.

33. The method of claim 22 wherein the affected growth is preventing progression of cataract formation.

30 34. The method of claim 33 wherein the compound is administered to the lens having a detectable cataract.

35. The method of claim 22 wherein the affected growth

is reversing cataract formation.

36. The method of claim 35 wherein the compound is administered to the lens having a detectable cataract.

37. An article of manufacture comprising a packaging material and contained therein in a separate container the targeting vector of claim 7, and wherein the packaging material comprises a label which indicates that the targeting vector can be used to disrupt an  $\alpha 3$  gene in a non-human mammal.

10 38. A method of affecting cataract growth in a subject, the method comprising administering to the subject a therapeutically effective cataract growth affecting amount of an interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) inhibitor.

15 39. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor is selected from the group consisting of Bcl2, BCL-XL, CrmA, lactacystin, and dichloroisocoumarin.

40. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor is administered orally.

41. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor is administered intravenously.

42. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor is administered topically.

43. The method of claim 42 wherein topical administration is on an eye.

25 44. The method of claim 42 wherein topical administration is in association with an ophthalmologically acceptable carrier.

45. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor is administered in association with an acceptable pharmaceutical carrier.

30 46. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor prevents cataract formation.

47. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor delays progression of cataract formation.

48. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor stops progression of cataract formation.

5 49. The method of claim 38 wherein the inhibitor causes regression of a formed cataract.

50. A screening method to identify an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog, the method comprising the steps of:

10 a) contacting a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein with ICE or functional ICE analog in the presence of a candidate inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions wherein ICE or functional ICE analog is known to cleave the lens protein generating detectable cleavage products; and

15 b) detecting an altered cleavage pattern, thereby identifying the inhibitor.

51. The method of claim 50 wherein the lens protein is purified.

20 52. The method of claim 50 wherein ICE or functional ICE analog is present in a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human mammal of claim 12.

53. The method of claim 50 wherein the lens protein, ICE or functional ICE analog, and the candidate inhibitor are in solution.

25 54. A screening method to identify an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog, the method comprising the steps of:

a) contacting a substrate of ICE or functional ICE homolog with a homogenate of lens isolated from the non-human 30 mammal of claim 12, wherein the homogenate contains ICE or functional ICE analog, in the presence of a candidate inhibitor of ICE or functional ICE analog under conditions

wherein ICE or functional ICE analog is known to cleave the substrate generating detectable cleavage products; and

b) detecting an altered cleavage, thereby identifying the inhibitor.

5 55. The method of claim 54 wherein the substrate, lens homogenate, and the candidate inhibitor are in solution.

56. A kit for identifying an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog, the kit comprising packaging means comprising a first container 10 containing a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein in an amount sufficient for at least one assay, and comprising a packaging material comprising a label indicating that the crystallin lens protein can be used to identify the inhibitor by detection of an altered cleavage pattern.

15 57. The kit according to claim 56 further comprising a second container containing ICE or functional ICE analog.

58. The kit of claim 57 wherein ICE or functional ICE analog is present in a homogenate of lens isolated from a non-human mammal of claim 12.

20 59. A kit for identifying an inhibitor of interleukin-1 $\beta$  converting enzyme (ICE) or functional ICE analog, the kit comprising packaging means comprising a first container containing a substrate of ICE or functional homolog and a second container comprising a homogenate of lens isolated from 25 a non-human mammal having disrupted alleles of  $\alpha$ 3 connexin gene; and comprising a packaging material comprising a label indicating that the crystallin lens protein can be used to identify the inhibitor by detection of an altered cleavage pattern.

30 60. The kit of claim 59 wherein the substrate is a  $\gamma$ -crystallin lens protein.

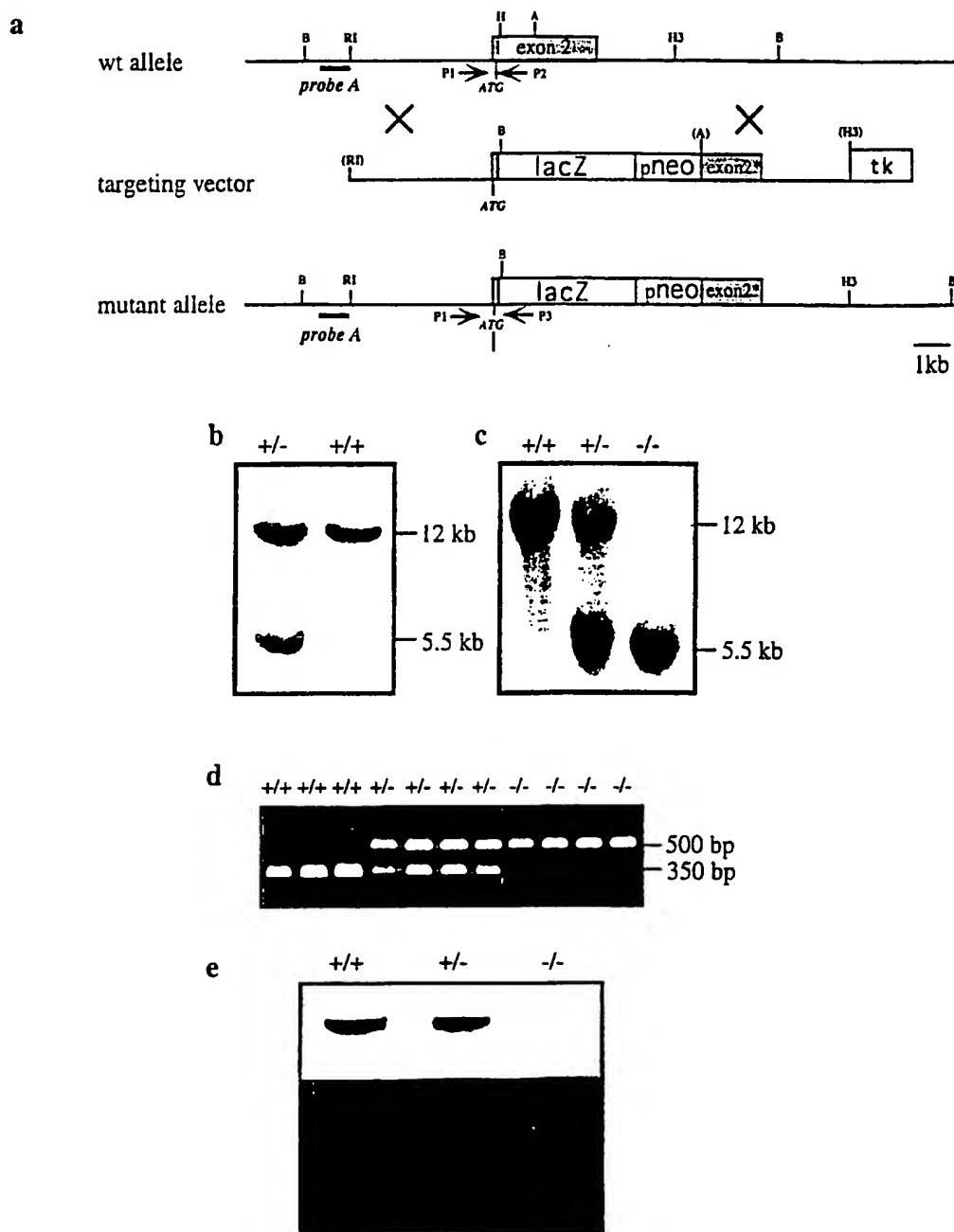


FIGURE 1

FIGURE 2

A



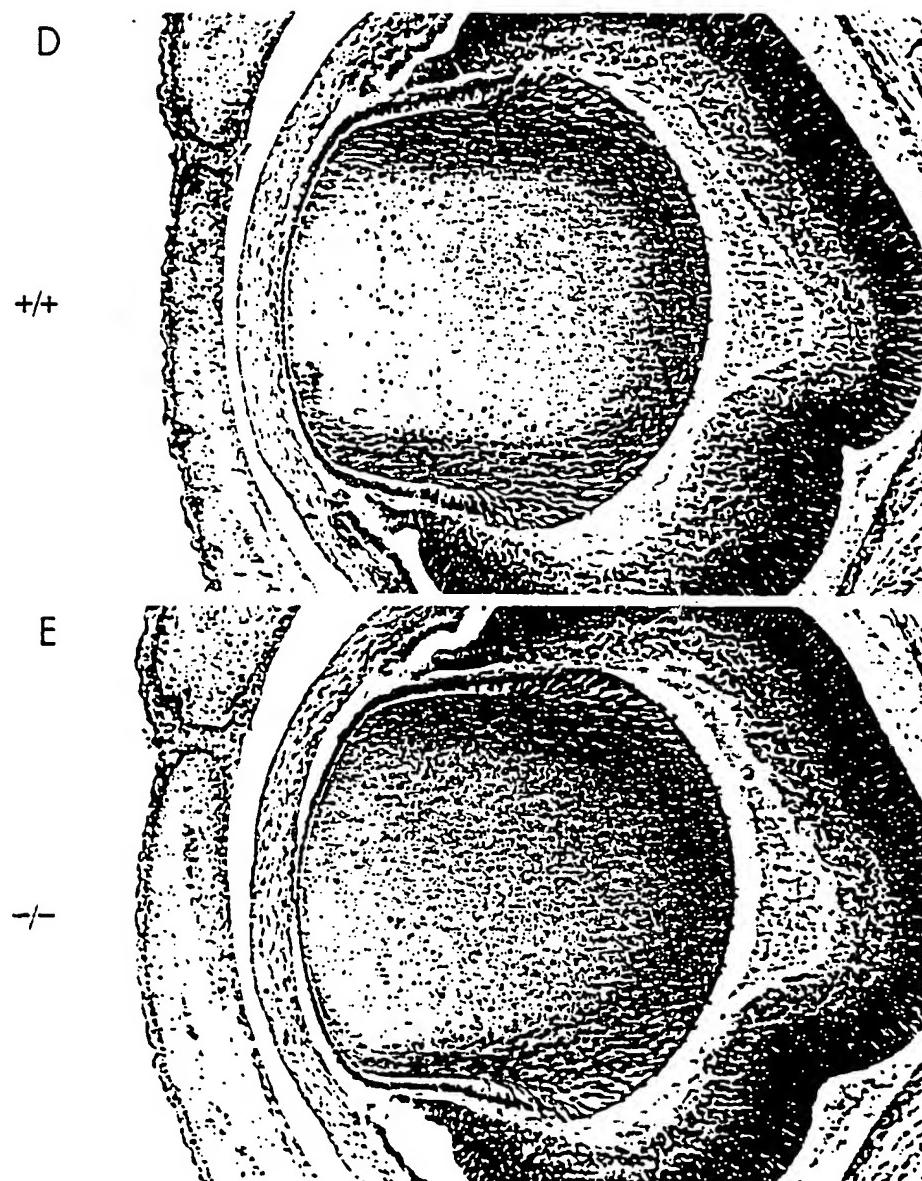
B



C



FIGURE 2



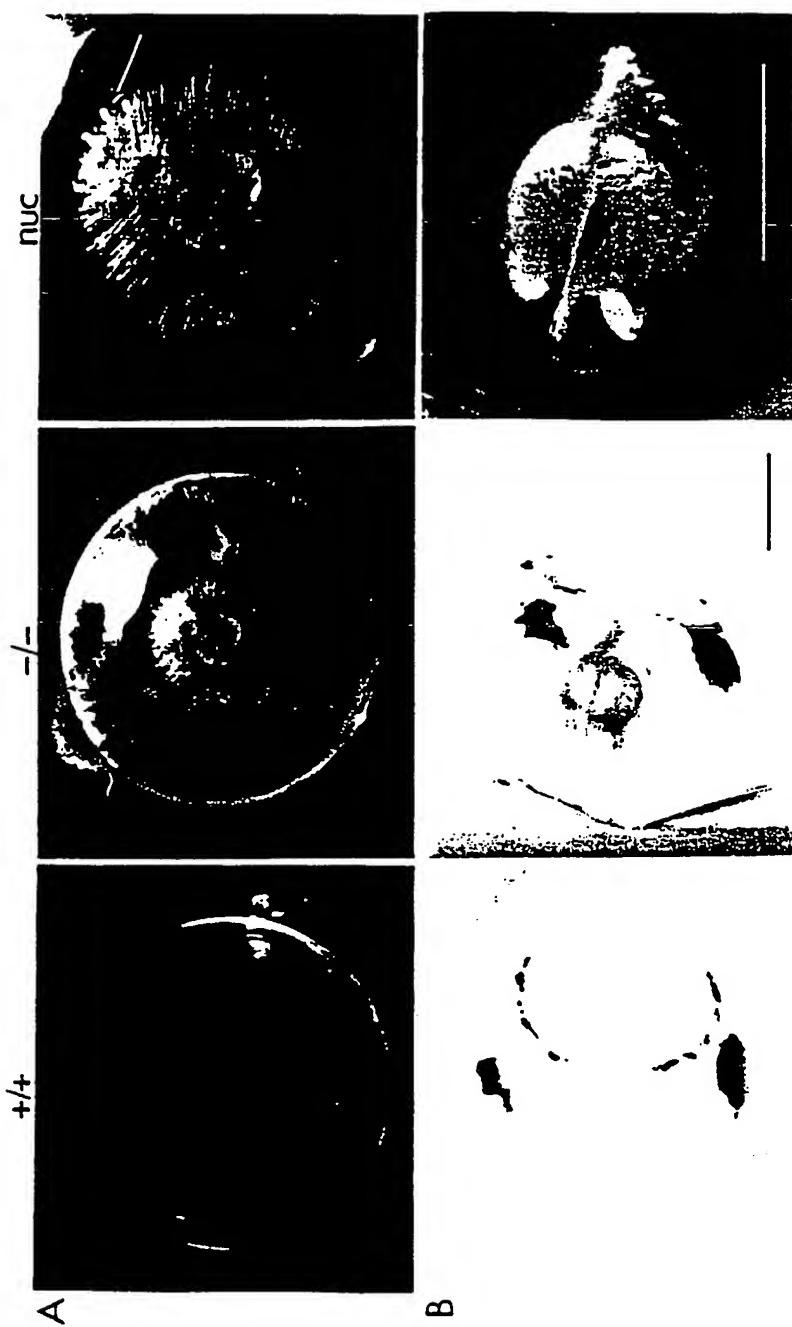


FIGURE 3

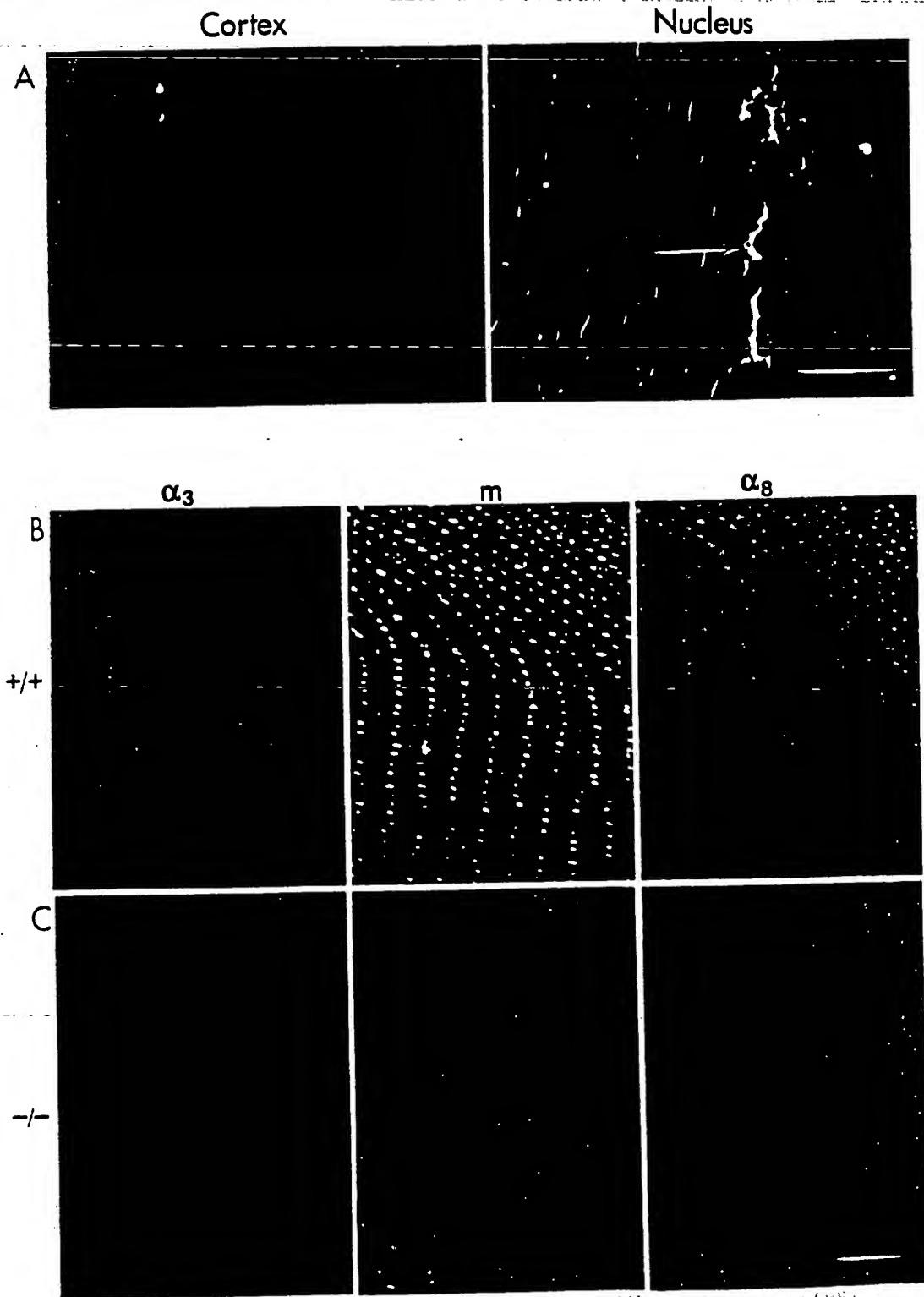


FIGURE 4

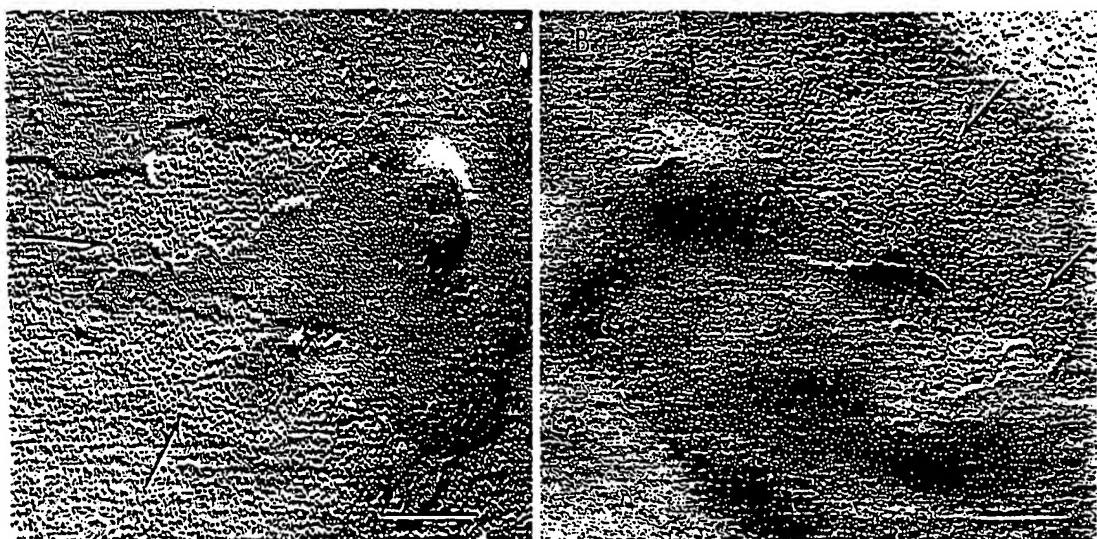
WO 98/30677

6/11

PCT/US98/00340

FIGURE 5

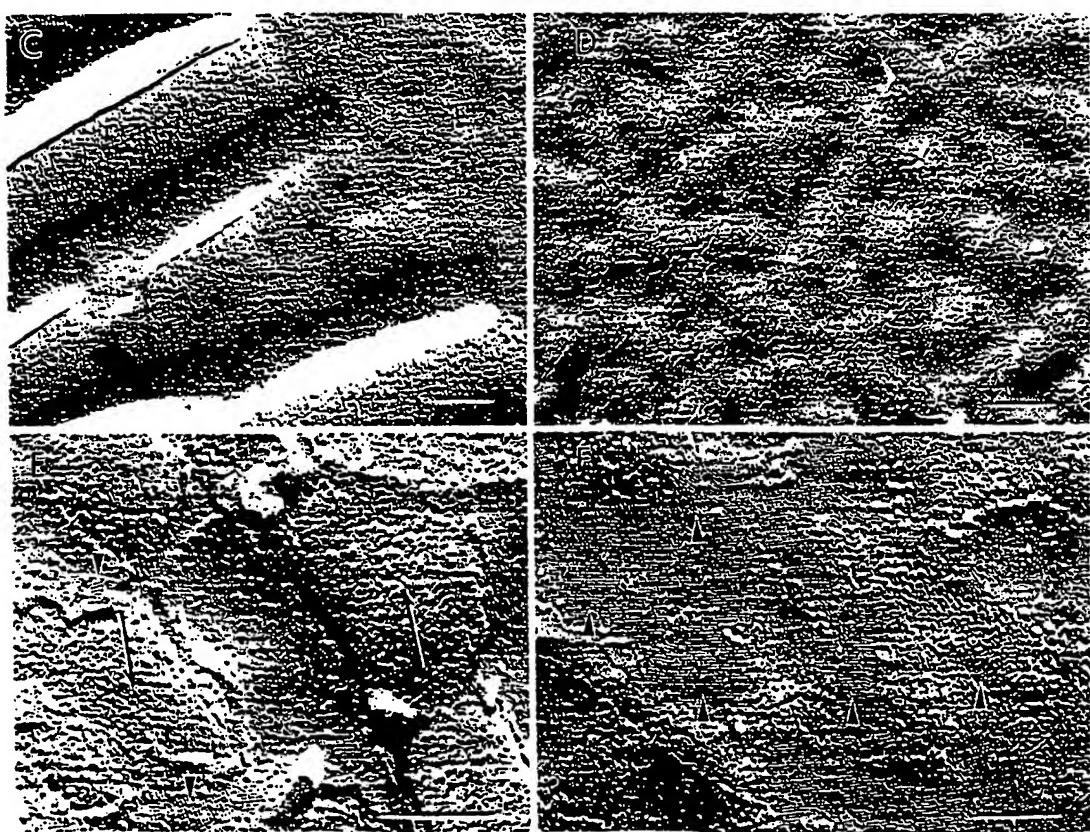
Cortex



+/+

Nucleus

-/-



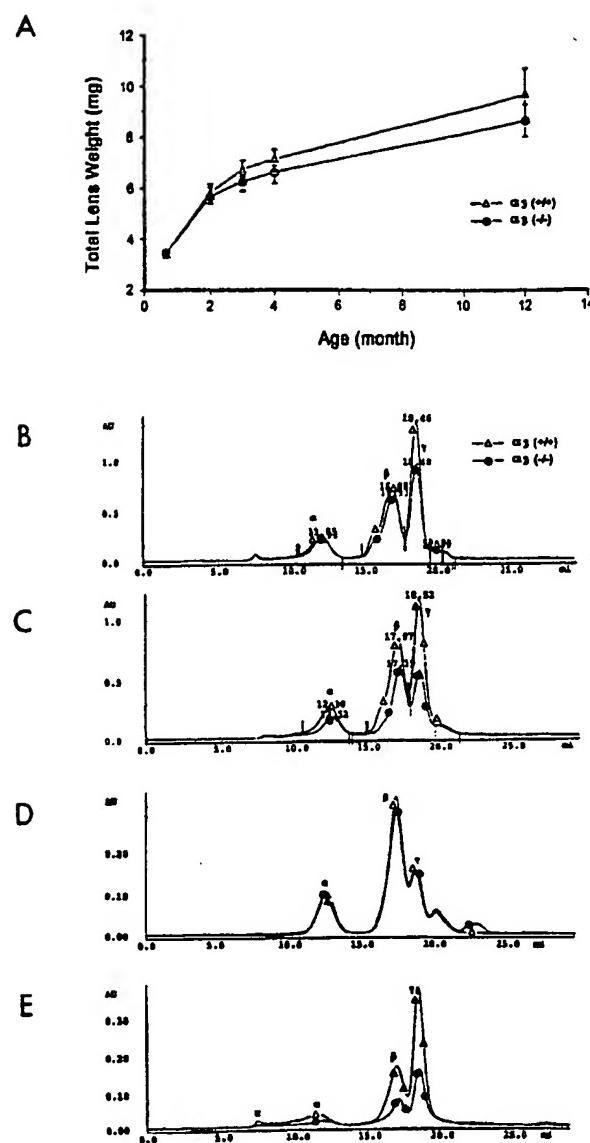


FIGURE 6



FIGURE 7

## FIGURE 8A

ATG GGC GAC TGG AGC TTC CTG GGG CGG CTG CTG GAG AAC GCA CAG GAG Met Gly Asp Trp Ser Phe Leu Gly Arg Leu Leu Glu Asn Ala Gln Glu 1 5 10 15	48
CAC TCT ACA GTC ATC GCC AAA GTG TGG CTG ACC CTG CTG TTC ATC TTC His Ser Thr Val Ile Gly Lys Val Trp Leu Thr Val Leu Phe Ile Phe 20 25 30	96
CGC ATT CTG GTG TTA GGG GCG GCA GCC GAG GAG GTG TGG GGC GAC GAG Arg Ile Leu Val Leu Gly Ala Ala Ala Glu Glu Val Trp Gly Asp Glu 35 40 45	144
CAA TCG GAC TTC ACC TGC AAC ACA CAG CAG CCA GGC TGT GAG AAC GTC Gln Ser Asp Phe Thr Cys Asn Thr Gln Gln Pro Gly Cys Glu Asn Val 50 55 60	192
TGC TAC GAC CGC GCT TTC CCC ATT TCG CAC ATC CGC TTC TGG GCG CTG Cys Tyr Asp Arg Ala Phe Pro Ile Ser His Ile Arg Phe Trp Ala Leu 65 70 75 80	240
CAA ATC ATC TTC GTG TCT ACG CCC ACC CTC ATC TAT CTG GGC CAC CTG Gln Ile Ile Phe Val Ser Thr Pro Thr Leu Ile Tyr Leu Gly His Val 85 90 95	288
CTA CAC ATC GTG CGC ATG GAG GAG AAG AAA GAG CGG GAG GAA GAG Leu His Ile Val Arg Met Glu Glu Lys Lys Glu Arg Glu Glu Glu 100 105 110	336
CTG CTG AGG AGA GAC AAC CCT CAG CAC GGC CGT GGT CGC GAG CCA ATG Leu Leu Arg Arg Asp Asn Pro Gln His Gly Arg Gly Arg Glu Pro Met 115 120 125	384
CGT ACA GGG AGC CCG CGG GAC CCT CCA CTA CGC GAT GAC CGT GGC AAG Arg Thr Gly Ser Pro Arg Asp Pro Pro Leu Arg Asp Asp Arg Gly Lys 130 135 140	432
GTG CGC ATC GCA GGT GCG CTG CTG CGG ACC TAC GTC TTC AAC ATC ATC Val Arg Ile Ala Gly Ala Leu Leu Arg Thr Tyr Val Phe Asn Ile Ile 145 150 155 160	480
TTC AAG ACA CTC TTC GAA GTG GGG TTC ATC GCG GGC CAG TAC TTT CTA Phe Lys Thr Leu Phe Glu Val Gly Ile Ala Gly Gln Tyr Phe Leu 165 170 175	528
TAC GGC TTC CAG CTG CAG CCA CTT TAC CGC TGC GAC CGC TGG CCC TGC Tyr Gly Phe Gln Leu Gln Pro Leu Tyr Arg Cys Asp Arg Trp Pro Cys 180 185 190	576

## FIGURE 8B

CCC AAC ACT GTG GAC TGT TTC ATC TCC AGG CCC ACA GAG AAG ACC ATC Pro Asn Thr Val Asp Cys Phe Ile Ser Arg Pro Thr Glu Lys Thr Ile 195 200 205	624
TTT GTC ATC TTC ATG CTG GCT GTG GCC TGT GCG TCA CTG GTA CTC AAC Phe Val Ile Phe Met Leu Ala Val Ala Cys Ala Ser Leu Val Leu Asn 210 215 220	672
ATG CTG GAG ATT TAC CAC CTG GGC TGG AAG AAG CTC AAG CAG GGA GTT Met Leu Glu Ile Tyr His Leu Gly Trp Lys Lys Leu Lys Gln Gly Val 225 230 235 240	720
ACT AAC CAC TTC AAC CCA GAT GCC TCA GAA GCC AGG CAC AAG CCC TTG Thr Asn His Phe Asn Pro Asp Ala Ser Glu Ala Arg His Lys Pro Leu 245 250 255	768
GAC CCC CTA CCC GCG GCC ACC AGC TCT GGC CCA CCC AGC GTC TCC ATC Asp Pro Leu Pro Ala Ala Thr Ser Ser Gly Pro Pro Ser Val Ser Ile 260 265 270	816
GGG TTC CCA CCT TAT TAC AGA CAC CCT GCC TGT CCC ACA GTA CAG GGA Gly Phe Pro Pro Tyr Tyr Thr His Pro Ala Cys Pro Thr Val Gln Gly 275 280 285	864
AAG GCC ATA GGG TTT CCT GGG GCC CCA CTA TCA CCA GCA GAC TTC ACA Lys Ala Ile Gly Phe Pro Gly Ala Pro Leu Ser Pro Ala Asp Phe Thr 290 295 300	912
GTG GTG ACT CTA AAC GAT GCC CAA GGC AGA AAC CAC CCA GTC AAA CAC Val Val Thr Leu Asn Asp Ala Gln Gly Arg Asn His Pro Val Lys His 305 310 315 320	960
TGG AAT GGC CAC CAC CTG ACG ACA GAG CAG AAC TGG ACC AGG CAA GTG Cys Asn Gly His His Leu Thr Thr Glu Gln Asn Trp Thr Arg Gln Val 325 330 335	1008
GCA GAG CAG CAG ACT CCA GCC AGC AAG CCC TCT TCA GCA GCA TCC AGC Ala Glu Gln Gln Thr Pro Ala Ser Lys Pro Ser Ser Ala Ala Ser Ser 340 345 350	1056
CCT GAT GGC CGC AAG GGG CTC ATT GAC AGC ACT GGC AGC AGC TTA CAG Pro Asp Gly Arg Lys Gly Leu Ile Asp Ser Ser Gly Ser Ser Leu Gln 355 360 365	1104
GAG AGT GCC TTG GTA GTG ACG CCA GAG GAG GGG GAA CAG GCT TTG GCC Glu Ser Ala Leu Val Val Thr Pro Glu Glu Gly Glu Gln Ala Leu Ala 370 375 380	1152
ACC ACA GTG GAG ATG TAC TCG CCA CCG TTG GTC CTC CTG GAC CCA GGA Thr Thr Val Glu Met Tyr Ser Pro Pro Leu Val Leu Leu Asp Pro Gly 385 390 395 400	1200

### FIGURE 8C

AGG TCC AGC AAG TCC AGT AAC GGA CGT GCC AGA CCA CGT GAC TTG GCC	1248
Arg Ser Ser Lys Ser Ser Asn Gly Arg Ala Arg Pro Gly Asp Leu Ala	
405 410 415	
ATC TAGCCATAGT CATTCCAGAT ACCTTTATAA ACCTTCTCTT TACCCCTTAG	1301
Ile	
AAACCAAAAC ACTCAAAAAG CATTCTAAT CAACAGGTAG AAAGAGAGAG AGAGGAAAAA	1361
ACCAAAACCA AAAAACCTGA CAGTGCTGGA TTCCCCTGAG GGAAACACTG AGCAAACCTGG	1421
ATCAGTCTGG TTTTAATGCT TGCTGTTCTT GTCCCTGTGG GACAGGGTGG GGGTCACCCCC	1481
AGTGTCTGAG ATCGAGGTGG GGGCAGAGCA AGGTTGTTGG CTCCCAGCAG TGCTTGCTCT	1541
TGTTCGGCCT CCTCCACTAT TCTGTATGA TGAAGCAACA GGTGTTANCA GCCCTTCAGT	1601
GGGGGGACAA NTCAGTTCC ATTCTTAAGC TCTCCAAGCA GCCCAGAGAG TCACAGAGGC	1661
ACTTAAGCTC TATCTCTGCT TGAGACTTTT AACTTAGAGT TCAATTTCAT TTTGGATAT	1721
TTGCCAAACT GTACTAAAAA AAGACTTGGA ATCTATCTAG TGTCGCTTGA GCTTCTGGAA	1781
TTGCATGTGA GGTCCAGGAC ATCCAECTCC AGGCTGCAGG ACNCAGCGAC AGAGTAACAG	1841
TTGTCTCCA GTGCTTTTC CATGGGACAA GGCCACAGGC ATTCCCTGGTA GAGGCAGGTG	1901
GAGATGCAGA GACCCTGGAA AGCCCTCAA CAGAGGAGGA AGATGGTGGT CTGGCAGGTA	1961
TTGCCGTAGG TGTCATTTA TTTCTTGAT GATATTTGT GCTTAGCCTG GATGGTGAAA	2021
GTATTTACCC CCCTCCCCCA CATAACACATA TTTGCCCTT CATTAAAAAA AATAGTGCCA	2081
TTAAAATGAC TACTGATCAG GGAGATGTTT AATTAGTTAA GATTTGGACT TTCCTTTAAA	2141
ACAAATCCAC CTTCCATGTC AGCCAACCAA TCACTATGAG GATGTCTAGG TAAAAAAATTA	2201
ACCACTGTGA GAATGTACGC TAGATAAAAC TTGGGGTAGG GGATTCACAT GCGTTTTAAG	2261
TACTTGAAGT TTTAAAAGTT TCTGAATCGG AGGTTCACTA CTGTTACAAG GAAAAATGTT	2321
TATCCAGATG AATCATTGAT GACTCACACT TAAAAGAAAG TACACACTTA AAACACTTCA	2381
AG	2383

## INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.  
PCT/US98/00340

## A. CLASSIFICATION OF SUBJECT MATTER

IPC(6) :C12N 5/00, 15/00, 15/09, 15/63  
US CL :800/2; 435/172.3, 69.1, 325, 320.1; 424/9.21

According to International Patent Classification (IPC) or to both national classification and IPC

## B. FIELDS SEARCHED

Minimum documentation searched (classification system followed by classification symbols)

U.S. : 800/2; 435/172.3, 69.1, 325, 320.1; 424/9.21

Documentation searched other than minimum documentation to the extent that such documents are included in the fields searched

Electronic data base consulted during the international search (name of data base and, where practicable, search terms used)

Please See Extra Sheet.

## C. DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	PAUL et al. Connexin46, a Novel Gap Junction Protein, Induces Voltage-Gated Currents in Nonjunctional Plasma Membrane of <i>Xenopus</i> Oocytes. Journal of Cell Biology. November 1991, Vol. 115, No. 4, pages 1077-1089, see entire document.	1-22
Y	NELLES et al. Defective Propagation of Signals Generated by Sympathetic Nerve Stimulation in the Liver of Connexin32-Deficient Mice. Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America. September 1996, Vol. 93, pages 9565-9570, see entire document.	1-60

Further documents are listed in the continuation of Box C.  See patent family annex.

* Special categories of cited documents:	"T"	later document published after the international filing date or priority date and not in conflict with the application but cited to understand the principle or theory underlying the invention
"A" document defining the general state of the art which is not considered to be of particular relevance	"X"	document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered novel or cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is taken alone
"E" earlier document published on or after the international filing date	"Y"	document of particular relevance; the claimed invention cannot be considered to involve an inventive step when the document is combined with one or more other such documents, such combination being obvious to a person skilled in the art
"L" document which may throw doubts on priority claim(s) or which is cited to establish the publication date of another citation or other special reason (as specified)	"&"	document member of the same patent family
"O" document referring to an oral disclosure, use, exhibition or other means		
"P" document published prior to the international filing date but later than the priority date claimed		

Date of the actual completion of the international search Date of mailing of the international search report

09 APRIL 1998

26 MAY 1998

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## INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT

International application No.  
PCT/US98/00340

## C (Continuation). DOCUMENTS CONSIDERED TO BE RELEVANT

Category*	Citation of document, with indication, where appropriate, of the relevant passages	Relevant to claim No.
Y	REAUME et al. Cardiac Malformation in Neonatal Mice Lacking Connexin43. Science. 24 March 1995, Vol. 267, pages 1831-1834, see entire document.	1-60
A	BRUZZONE et al. Connections with Connexins: The Molecular Basis of Direct Intercellular Signaling. European Journal of Biochemistry. 1996, Vol. 238, pages 1-27, see entire document.	1-60
X	GONG et al. Disruption of Alpha-3 Connexin Gene Leads to Age-Related Cataract Formation in Mice. Molecular Biology of the Cell. 07-11 December 1996, Suppl. 7, page 509A, Abstract # 2961, see entire Abstract.	12-15, 17-22 -----
Y	CAPECCHI. Targeted Gene Replacement. Scientific American. March 1994, Vol. 270, No. 3, pages 34-41, see entire document.	1-11, 16, 23-60
Y	WESTPHAL. Transgenic Mammals and Biotechnology. FASEB Journal. 1989, Vol. 3, pages 117-120, see pages 119-120.	1-60
X, P ----- Y, P	GONG et al. Disruption of $\alpha_3$ Connexin Gene Leads to Proteolysis and Cataractogenesis in Mice. Cell. 12 December 1997, Vol. 91, pages 833-843, see entire document.	1-6, 8-15, 17-22 ----- 7, 16, 23-60

**INTERNATIONAL SEARCH REPORT**

International application No. PCT/US98/00340
---

**B. FIELDS SEARCHED**

Electronic data bases consulted (Name of data base and where practicable terms used):

MEDLINE, GENBANK, BIOSIS, EMBASE, CAPLUS, WPIDS, USPATFULL, APS  
search terms: connexin, alpha3 connexin, connexin46, transgene, homologous recombination, knockout, disrupt, mouse  
or mice, cataracts or crystalline lens, interleukin-1-beta converting enzyme, inhibit or cleave

